Instructional Clarity Examined as a Transactional Communication Process

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This study reexamined the instructional communication construct of teacher clarity through student perceptions. Through multiple open ended data collection measures, the study helped redefine instructional clarity through the widely accepted transactional communication model. The major findings indicated clarity is not a rhetorical construct with instructors being the only determining participant. How students interpret the message, build relationships, overcome barriers, and various other key themes emerged during the data analysis. This study provided a key reexamination of clarity for future studies.

KEYWORDS: clarity, teacher clarity, instructional communication, transactional communication
INSTRUCTIONAL CLARITY EXAMINED AS A TRANSACTIONAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS

DAKOTA C. HORN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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INSTRUCTIONAL CLARITY EXAMINED AS A TRANSACTIONAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS

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D. C. H.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the process of teaching a class, writing a dissertation, or simply communicating any knowledge, a message creator has certain responsibilities they must accomplish. The message creator must use concise language, organize thoughts, and repeat and emphasize key terms. In a communication encounter, a communicator has a certain obligation to craft clear messages. However, accomplishing clarity and understanding with one or more receivers of that message incorporates a great deal more variables and considerations than just how the message is created and sent. The sole purpose of this study was to define teacher clarity as more than a rhetorical construct but as a transactional construct.

My first year as a doctoral student, I was asked by Dr. Cheri Simonds to help co-author a handbook chapter about teacher clarity. I was excited at the opportunity and agreed. However, after conversations with the editor, we ended up backing out because of the demand to only examine teacher clarity as a rhetorical construct. At first, I was confused and a bit disappointed as this made sense to view this construct in a rhetorical context. One would assume clarity behaviors are things only controlled by the sender of the message. This is the mindset I wanted readers of this dissertation to start with as well. Just like the literature defines clarity as a rhetorical construct, think of clarity as a rhetorical construct in the early stages of this study. The goal is to then transform this conception through the lens of a transactional communication process. Yes, teachers use particular strategies and behaviors to help accomplish clarity and understanding for members of their classroom. However, throughout the literature review, data collection and presentation, the relational and transactional nature of clarity and the various influences of accomplishing clarity must be considered. Once again, the goal of this dissertation was to provide evidence of how clarity could be much more than just rhetorical strategies.
including student interactions, student barriers to understanding, relationships created, the content interest, and a variety of other considerations.

Accomplishing clarity in the classroom is no easy task. Defining clarity as a construct in the classroom is just as complicated. The desire to study this particular construct stems from my desire to teach and have those I teach, understand the content. Throughout my many years as a pupil and now many years as an educator, I often found myself asking what makes clarity happen? What is clarity? The purpose of this study was to re-examine clarity as a transactional process.

**Overview of Teacher Clarity**

Teacher clarity is often argued as one of the most important constructs in the classroom (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). Theoretically, clarity in instruction leads to all other instructional variables by setting a foundation for students to understand material. Therefore, it is important to understand the historical foundations of teacher clarity as a construct, the various definitions attributed to the clarity, as well as the growth from a rhetorical to a relational construct.

**Statement of the Problem**

Teacher clarity is well documented and studied as a rhetorical process defining the need for teachers to use particular strategies and behaviors to accomplish clarity such as teaching in a step-by-step manner, using relevant examples, repeating instructions, using verbal organizers, and summaries to name a few (Bolkan, 2017a; Cruickshank, 1985; Linvill & Cranmer, 2017; Rosenshine & Furst, 1971; Titsworth & Mazer, 2010). I agree one must use particular rhetorical strategies to help accomplish clarity, and this is not being argued in this study. However, the idea of communication and clarity being a much more complicated transaction deserves greater study.
A classroom is a unique environment that has a content expert directing learning and knowledge acquisition while a group of individuals attempt to find a connection with both the material and the teacher (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Kelsey, 2016). Rhetorical/relational theory provides framework to propose that student and teacher actions interact and are dependent of one another (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006). Other researchers have argued, "Clarity is a continuum which reflects the degree to which a source has narrowed the possible interpretations of a message and succeeded in achieving a correspondence between his or her intentions and the interpretation of the receiver" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). To better understand the nature of a continuum, figure 1 provides a visual of how the rhetorical and relational aspect of teacher clarity might work. Students and teachers interact with behaviors that are both independent and dependent of one another in a communication setting. Teachers have certain rhetorical characteristics they employ and then students use clarifying tactics. These show the interaction between the two with the communication experience happening back and forth on the continuum. This is not an exhaustive list but shows the argument research has created through a dyadic mechanism of clarity.

**Figure 1. Rhetorical/Relational Spectrum**

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Figure 1 emphasizes the multiple parts of communication that is dependent on a listener/speaker exchange. A person's ability to understand any relational partner is “dependent on the perception of understanding the idiosyncrasies of relational partner's communication style” (Avtgis, 2001, p. 348). If the listener has no understanding of the communication style it makes it more difficult to process and encode information. This speaks to the strategy of style and how a teacher begins the conversation in the classroom. But teachers most likely modify their rhetorical strategies based on student responses. Zhang (2011) argued clarity is often associated not as an initial interaction but over a period of time with multiple frequencies and occurrences. Clarity at its rhetorical stage could be identical from classroom to classroom for each teacher but the meaning received and encoded by the students may not be the same, indicating an unclear teacher. For example, a teacher may use the exact same instructions for an activity used in three different classes. Each class might have different questions or confusions about what is being asked. The teacher did exactly what teacher clarity research suggests, repeat instructions, use simple language, allow for questions, organize the material in a logical way, and straightforward instruction. The first two classes had no questions or issues and complete the activity with success. The third class, however, seemingly cannot begin the activity, follow the prompts, or accomplish the intended outcomes of the activity. Many teachers have had these issues and even recycle activities because of the inability of students to accomplish intended goals. Does this mean the teacher was not clear? It suggests there are more elements in the clarity behaviors that potentially affect the clarity process. Simply exhibiting rhetorical teacher clarity behaviors does not mean they are a clear teacher. Teacher clarity must then be theorized as a more relational construct or possibly in a transactional context. Once again, rhetorical clarity refers to the individual behaviors teachers utilize to communication classroom content and processes. Relational clarity begins to examine
how student interaction, environmental variables, and various non-teacher centered constructs affect the clarity process.

The idea of expanding the concept of clarity from teacher messages to the role the student plays in clarifying the message involves both encoding and decoding of messages (Civikly, 1992). The lecture is a good place to understand rhetorical clarity. Teachers can stand in the front of the room and lecture without interruption and clear behaviors might be included. However, this includes messages with little feedback from the students and how they interact with the teacher and material. There are still subtle parts of the communication exchange that might signal lack of clarity or understanding from the receiver. Nonverbal cues could indicate that the message is unclear such as a furrowed brow, tilting of the head, or lack of eye contact. These are subtle instances that even the most developed and skilled teacher might have to make sense of.

The complexity of the classroom becomes even more complicated with the involvement of student question and answers, discussion-based classrooms, experiential learning, and a variety of mixed methods classrooms, just to mention a few considerations.

A rhetorical construct emphasizes the traditional rhetorical perspective, where verbal and nonverbal messages are used with the intention of influencing or persuading individuals (Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). Counter to this perspective is a relational perspective which is defined as a perspective in which individuals mutually create and use verbal and nonverbal messages to develop a relationship with each other and create meaning through a collaborative process (Mottet et al., 2006). Clarity is more than an attribute of messages; it is a relational construct which arises through a combination of source, message, and receiver factors.

With any research, exploration of new concepts and strategies help grow knowledge in the discipline. Teacher clarity needs to shift towards understanding student perspectives from a
qualitative standpoint rather than perceptions on a predetermined scale. Titsworth, Mazer, Goodboy, Bolkan, and Myers (2015) provided a helpful meta-analysis that takes stock of the many years of research as well as highlight the various contributions. However, they acknowledged the need for more updated work through experimental design as well as understanding how clarity is communicated as a process, which is more than just telling teachers to be clear. Their conclusion suggests there needs to be additional examination from students’ perspectives to label clear rhetorical teaching behaviors as well as determining the response tactics students will use (Loes, Salisbury, & Pascarella, 2015). This will lead the way to various other studies to examine the multifaceted process of accomplishing clarity, not simply attempting clarity through rhetorical devices. Understanding that researchers must begin a conversation about how to examine student and teacher understanding of what clarity is will help define the future research of teacher clarity (Blaich, Wise, Pascarella, & Roksa, 2016). Summaries of what gaps are present in the research and need further exploration and clarification are provided below. The intent of this research is to examine the transactional communication elements of teacher clarity and how those might affect one another in a relational context.

1. The issue of perception of what makes a teacher clear without asking students what those characteristics are is troublesome. The more clear and concise students “perceive” teachers to be (Avtgis, 2001, p. 350) is an often overstated attribute of the research. Cruickshank, Myers, and Moenjak (1975) had students list characteristics of clear teachers. This process has not been repeated much in research. Nearly fifty years and multiple changes in mediums of delivery could pose a change in described teacher clarity tactics. A qualitative study asking students to identify various parts of the clarity process would be valuable. I intended to do that by asking students to identify clarity behaviors.
2. It is important to understand student efficacy in the learning process. When students act in anticipatory scenarios (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1989), they can ask for clarity, counter the instructor, ignore the lack of understanding, and use a variety of different scenarios. The decision of what they use depends on their self-efficacy, relationship with the instructor, interest in the content, and a variety of other factors. This study does not discredit the importance of understanding the rhetorical constructs that help create an environment for successful instruction but explores the perceptions of students and the influences affecting their ability to process information. I intended to ask students what role they have in the clarity process and to define clarity seeking behaviors they might participate in.

3. The nature of clarity as a relational construct needs further examination and explanation (Eisenberg, 1984; Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006; Simonds, 1997). Student and teacher clarity behaviors don’t account for various other factors such as relationships that create interference outside of the control of the sender/receiver. I intended to examine how students define what clarity looks like in various relational experiences and to identify barriers of clarity.

4. A need is present to understand updated instances of what students perceive as a clear teaching environment. Classrooms and learning preferences have shifted. Clarity as a construct has focused on the nature of oral and written communication of the instructor (Sidlinger & McCroskey, 1997). Teacher clarity research must begin to examine the modes of communication that the instructor is using. Online courses, recorded lecture, asynchronous feedback, and learning management systems present a wide range of possibilities for potential clarity issues. A considerable amount of scholarship about
teacher clarity examines traditional classroom settings with face-to-face interaction. Scholarship should begin to use previous research designs in online environments to see what relationship teacher clarity constructs have with these various classroom settings (Titsworth & Mazer, 2010). A new list of clarity behaviors might include various new mediums of communication such as online, email, Zoom, Google Hangouts, and many more. The preferred channel of communication might highlight different teaching behaviors that might be used to accomplish clarity. I intended to identify preferred mediums as well as if there are differences of clarity behaviors in those mediums from student responses. A greater understanding of how clarity is accomplished using the most a widely accepted model of communication, the transactional model, guides this study. This helps clarity as a concept move beyond a rhetorical construct.

The intent of this research study was to address these four issues through qualitative research. Teacher clarity researchers must begin to update clarity behaviors, include student perceptions of what role they play in clarity (Kendrick & Darling, 1990), examine the various factors that may influence and affect teacher clarity (Civikly, 1992), and use qualitative research to create a panoramic view of how teacher clarity has shifted (or stayed the same) in the last five decades (Simonds, 1997). The results of this study could prompt more research to continue to examine the role of teacher clarity on positive student outcomes. I posit that teacher clarity is a transactional process of communication with necessary rhetorical messages through proper channels to establish clearer modes of understanding. Additionally, this process minimizes interferences for sender/receiver, adapts to feedback on misunderstanding/understanding, while addressing the relational component. These research considerations helped guide my research.
Research Questions

The most pressing issues included 1) the nature of clarity as a relational perspective needs further research and explanation (Eisenberg, 1984; Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006; Simonds, 1997); and 2) a need was present to understand updated instances of what teachers perceive as clear teacher behaviors; as well as exploring clarity as more than just rhetorical and relational perspectives, but a transactional process. The research of this construct started with a synthesis of teaching research (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971) and then an open ended response from students as to what makes a teacher clear (Cruickshank et al., 1975). These concepts need to be revisited. Using qualitative measures to ask students their perceptions of clarity and their role in the process will add to the teacher clarity research. It is important to note that qualitative research must account for multiple perceptions and convergence of ideas with precision to provide for translation between quantitative and qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998). The qualitative approach also helps advance many of the calls to examine the relational quality of clarity. This will be a first step in providing a framework for what is involved in the transactional approach to clarity. The following research questions guide this study. Question two includes seven sub-questions using the transactional communication model as guiding framework.

RQ1: How do students describe instructional clarity in the classroom?

RQ2: What elements affect the transactional process of teacher clarity?

Sub-RQ2.1: How do students describe clear teachers (People)?

Sub-RQ2.2: What particular teacher behaviors are identified as accomplishing clarity (Message)?
Sub-RQ2.3: What pedagogical processes and environments are identified as allowing clarity (Channel)?

Sub-RQ2.4: What interferes with clarity being accomplished (Interference)?

Sub-RQ2.5: What role do students perceive they play in accomplishing clarity in the classroom (Feedback)?

Sub-RQ2.6: How is clarity accomplished with different relational contexts between student and teacher (Context)?

Sub-RQ2.7: What relationship do students and teachers have that lead to clarity (People and Context)?

**Conceptual Framework**

Teacher clarity is well-documented throughout the literature (Bush, Kennedy, & Cruickshank, 1977; Chesebro, 2003; Hines, Cruickshank, & Kennedy, 1985; Land, 1979; Powell & Harville, 1990; Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). However, the rhetorical/relational tension of its definition needs further exploration. To better craft the structure of this research study, the transactional model of communication will be used as the conceptual framework. This model of communication identifies communication as a constant process, where senders and receivers act as both throughout the process. They are affected by interference as well as the relational context that they belong to. For the purpose of this study, it is important to understand the model and its influence on how communication is a complex and constant process. I wanted to look at the similarities between the elements of the transactional process and accomplishing clarity. Before even addressing clarity, it is important to understand the various models of communication and how communication happens. The three models of communication involve the actional/linear, interactional, and transactional model. The actional model views communication as a one-way
process in which a source conveys an encoded message through a channel to a receiver who then
decodes that message (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). An interactional model views communication
as a two-way process that includes feedback and the environment (Schramm, 1965; Westley &
MacLean, 1955). Meaning and understanding is co-created under a transactional communication
model (Barnlund, 1962; Berlo, 1960; Ross, 1977). In the next section, I define the transactional
model and explain the elements and how clarity could potentially be examined using this model.

**Transactional Communication Model Defined Elements**

The transactional communication process is a constant process of senders and receivers
continually encoding and decoding messages, adapting to feedback, and building a relationship
with the others in the communication process. The model is defined with six components
(Barnlund, 1962; Barnlund, 1970) listed below.

*People*-Senders and receivers are dynamic parts of the communication process.
Communication must have two or more individuals in the transactional model to occur.

*Message*-This is the initial message sent from a communicator. This is best described as
the rhetorical part of the transactional process. The message sender encodes a message to be sent
to receivers. At this time nothing has affected the message until it is sent.

*Channel*-describes the medium in which the message is sent that might include face to
face, over the phone, a video conference, and various other multifaceted media.

*Interference*-anything that gets in the way of understanding a communication exchange.
This can include noise that is external or internal. External noise could be others talking, the hum
of an air conditioner or the room being distracting. Internal noise could be other thoughts,
hunger, boredom, and various other psychological deterrents.
Feedback—This explains the message sent back to the initial sender of the communication message. This can include verbal and nonverbal communication. The lack of visual or auditory feedback can even be considered feedback. Feedback includes any response message that is provided or not provided that causes the initial sender to adapt their message to avoid misunderstanding.

Relational Context/Environment—Every communication exchange has a relational component built in. A teacher/student exchange is different on day one to day forty. They have shared experiences and knowledge after time together. They become more comfortable with one another. The relational context switches based on the scenario as well. One on one with the teacher versus with the entire class changes the communication setting. In short, the relational context of a communication model is the evolving relationship between the communicators.

Clarity as a Transactional Model

The first two elements, people and message, are covered in many studies on teacher clarity defining teacher clarity as the teaching behaviors (structural, verbal, and nonverbal), exhibited by instructors, that lead to understanding desired meaning of course-related content and processes. Teacher clarity research has neglected to explore the context, feedback from students, interference (internal and external), and channel in which the message is sent.

At its most elementary explanation, communication is comprised of six elements: people, message, channel, interference, feedback, and context.
This model (Berlo, 1960; Barnlund, 1962) of communication encompasses the variety of elements that might influence the clarity of a message. The next step in the research is to examine the research of teacher clarity behaviors and characteristics as well as a transactional model of communication that describes how communication happens. The goal of this research study was to use the transactional model of communication and its various components to provide a more detailed description of the rhetorical, relational, and transactional elements of accomplishing clarity in the classroom. The six elements of the transactional model of communication guide the main research questions.

The transactional model provides a glimpse into how a complex classroom interaction might look. For example, a teacher is using preferred teaching behaviors in explaining a complex topic. They have repeated to content multiple times, set up time for questions, allowed the students time to take notes, and various other tasks related to teaching behaviors specific to people and message in the model. The student then provides feedback by asking questions or staring blankly at the instructor. This creates an opportunity for the teacher to adjust their
message. But three elements of the transactional model still come into play. The student may have not been paying attention because they were hungry, distracted, or couldn’t hear because of music playing in their ear buds. All of this is affected by the relational context and environment of the classroom. Have the teacher and student interacted before? Do they have a more informal relationship? The accomplishment of clarity is also determinant upon the channel such as online delivery or in person delivery. All of the complexities of this model will help guide what I asked my participants.

**Purpose of the Study**

Much of the literature focuses on quantitative studies that use a predetermined scale which articulates desired teacher behaviors attributed to clarity which students then interpret based on a teaching situation (Bolkan, 2017a). The issue here is clarity has evolved in the fifty years researchers have been studying the phenomenon. These changes could include more diverse classrooms, delivery methods such as online/hybrid classes, shifts in technology students are accustomed to, and simply the shift in societal expectations of an instructor/student relationship. A strong argument is beginning to develop which acknowledges that student/teacher interaction is dependent on both parts of the dialogue (Mottet, Beebe, & Fleuriet, 2006). A transactional model of communication happens regardless of the situation, and it would be naïve for researchers to treat an instructional communication situation any differently. The quantitative approach to teacher clarity focused on rhetorical strategies. The next step is to craft qualitative studies to include student perceptions of what clarity is and its effect on other classroom constructs (Simonds, 1997), to examine clarity in a variety of learning environments (Titsworth, et al., 2015), to explore how students begin to deal with misunderstandings (Kendrick & Darling, 1990), and to study clarity as a multidimensional construct (Bolkan, 2017a).
The issue with teacher clarity is in the operational and conceptual definitions of the construct. The common definition of being clear and easy to understand is the most boiled down version of what this construct truly means. This study was an attempt to recategorize and reimagine core behaviors students define as clear actions based on their own personal accounts. It also was an attempt to define students’ perceived responsibility in clarity. The question of “what can I do as a student to accomplish clarity?” needs deeper understanding. Clarity should be defined as an accomplishment of understanding not simply an articulation of particular behaviors. Senders and receivers play a role in this process. Using a qualitative examination of students’ perceptions of both sides of the continuum will help guide further research. Studies that pose research questions that expand the idea of what student actions look like will have a potential influence how instructors accomplish clarity in the classroom. These student actions may include nonverbal cues, thought out responses by the student, as well as asking questions. If researchers continue to use the current scales of teaching behaviors; they ignore the relational aspect of student/teacher interaction in the process of understanding. Teacher clarity is presented as a rhetorical construct in most literature with many researchers beginning to explore further understanding and how relationships influence teaching behavior (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2003; Eisenberg, 1984, Kendrick & Darling, 1990; McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; Simonds, 1997). However, a fuller understanding of teacher clarity must be considered to enhance the operational and conceptual definitions of teacher clarity as argued by several scholars (Eisenberg, 1984; Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Simonds, 1997). The continuum presented in figure one previously shown on page three is an acknowledgement of multiple perspectives of meaning and intention and the corresponding interpretation and behavioral reaction. Students and
teachers may or may not know the role they play in accomplishing understanding and how they might guide how others attempt clarity.

This study was designed to examine clarity as a transactional process using student responses as what they perceive as an effective method of clarity. Questions must be asked that explore iterative approaches that address the typical literature proposal but avoid the pitfalls of typical instructional communication research. Teacher clarity behaviors are important to understand. They shift and evolve over time. Clarity is not merely instruction, directions, expectations, and guidance (Blaich et al., 2016; Bolkan, 2017b). Teacher clarity is different for each and every student. This study investigated potential gaps in the foundational definitions of teacher clarity, both as an operational and conceptual definition. Quite simply this study sought to define reimagine teacher clarity by asking students to define what clarity means to them through various transactional communication processes.

**Significance of the Study**

Without doubt, the teacher clarity research over the last few decades provides a great deal of context to understanding the linear process of communication. Teachers should and must perform particular behaviors and processes to accomplish clarity. However, this study is to illuminate the remainder of the transactional model of communication aspects that help accomplish clarity.

Using the basic principles of communication models widely accepted in communication and education scholarship, I wish to explain various relational aspects that affect clarity in instructional settings. It is widely accepted that teachers must use particular rhetorical strategies to encode clear messages which address two of the 6 elements of transactional communication. To accomplish understanding in a communication exchange, it is important to understand the
role of the receiver feedback, the interference of accomplishing clarity, the relational context, and the pedagogical channel in which the clarity is attempted. This research was an attempt to define those parts through student explanation and argue for the expansion of teacher clarity research to include more transactional models.

Teacher clarity deserves further research in the relational role that multiple people play in a communication exchange. It is imperative to begin examining the relationship of teacher clarity and related variables such as student motivation, teacher experience, affect for learning, interest in the topic, the mode of communication, and the classroom design such as lecture/discussion (Avtgis, 2001; Zhang, 2011). However, it is important to first examine two key elements of teacher clarity before conducting studies of this nature. Because an instructor performs a specific behavior does not guarantee that the students interpret that behavior the way a scale intended to measure it (Violanti, Kelly, Garland, & Christen, 2018). Very few qualitative approaches exist when approaching teacher clarity research (Blaich et al., 2016; Hativa, 1998). Qualitative research studies provide an exploratory environment to help find perceptions, definitions, and possibly counterarguments to current quantitative research practices.

Building on previous research of teacher clarity behaviors, this study adds to the preferred teaching behaviors that contribute to clarity. The study identifies interference in accomplishing clarity and potentially highlight strategies to minimize those interferences. Along with the relational contexts described by students, I describe the clarification tactics used by students. In short, I theoretically drew comparisons to the transactional model of communication but provide advice and perspective for teachers on how to best accomplish clarity in the classroom from student perspectives.
Definition of Terms

*Content Clarity:* Teacher clarity behaviors that communicate the content material of a course (Simonds, 1997).

*Process Clarity:* Teacher clarity behaviors that communicate anything other than the content material of a course including, but not limited to, policies and procedures, studying for exams, relevance and expectations of the course and tasks (Simonds, 1997).

*Teacher Clarity:* Preferred teaching behaviors that contribute to the understanding of instructional information (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998; Fendick, 1990; Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986). It is important to note that this is a working definition constructed from the various literature defining clarity as a rhetorical construct.

*Linear/Actional communication*—communication viewed as a transmission of a signal. A key element to this model is it is viewed as one way communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949).

*Interactional communication*—This model adds encoding as a responsibility of the receiver. This adds feedback as a key element to the communication model. Individuals act as sender and receiver of a message (Schramm, 1965; Westley & MacLean, 1955).

*Transactional communication*—The process model that identifies communication as a constant process while every member simultaneously participates in the interaction through encoding, decoding, providing feedback, and navigating interference (Barnlund, 1962; Berlo, 1960; Ross, 1977).

*Rhetorical Process/Construct*—Refers to the rhetorical perspective as in the development of a message from a teacher and reception by a student. Rhetorical constructs suggest a linear process where teachers are the source of instructional messages and students receive these
messages with little or no interaction. Based on the basic tenets of rhetoric used by Greek philosophers, communication is dependent on inventing, arranging, and delivering messages.

*Relational Process/Construct*-Viewed as a collaborative process where individuals mutually create messages while forming a relationship using various elements of a transactional communication process.

*Variable/Construct/Process*-Throughout the dissertation, these three terms will be used interchangeably. Variable often describes something that is measurable. Clarity researchers first itemized particular behaviors and placed them on a scale. Then the debate about relational elements of teacher clarity began to emerge showing clarity as more of an idea containing conceptual elements that could be subjective. And clarity is a process of communication showing a series of actions or steps taken to achieve a particular end.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teacher Clarity

Instructional communication researchers agree teacher clarity is a valuable asset to have in the classroom leading to successful learning opportunities, increased student efficacy, and is linked to various teacher characteristics such as immediacy, enhanced learning and understanding, as well as student engagement (Avtgis, 2001; Bolkam, 2016; Chesebro, 2003; Civikly, 1992; Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Finn & Schrodt, 2012; Loes & Pascarella, 2015; Violanti et al., 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2005). Teacher clarity affects student perceptions of teachers and other teacher variables that directly lead to increased learning (Zhang, 2011). Clear teaching behaviors (and what those are defined as) have been a common interest of researchers with initial studies examining the link of clarity, expressiveness, and lecturing to the learning of information (Cruickshank et al., 1975; Solomon, Rosenber, & Bezdek, 1964). Clarity behaviors were associated with lecturing and created a correlation of the amount of time devoted to information transmission to the greater likelihood of the student understanding which then focused this research as “teacher clarity” (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). Clarity, first started to emerge in communication and education research with a study signifying that learning and student evaluations related positively to clarity, expressiveness, and warmth (Solomon et al., 1964). The initial examination left a considerable amount of defining and conceptualizing for future scholars. What did clarity, expressiveness, and warmth look like? How were they related? Many studies follow trying to define teacher clarity, relate its importance to classroom effectiveness, and articulate the need for training teachers to be clear. The review of literature explores clarity as it was researched as a rhetorical construct, the evolution to relational
construct, communication models and their role in clarity, and more specifically the transactional communication model.

**Teacher Clarity as a Rhetorical Construct**

The basic construction of a rhetorical construct is the element of one-way communication. The tradition of rhetorical perspective is designing a message often with persuasive intent. Rhetorical language is the art of speaking or writing effectively. Greek philosophers often attributed the oratory and rhetoric of politicians to their success. In the case of instructional constructs, it is best to describe the nature of a rhetorical construct as a linear process with the teacher providing a message and student being compliant with that message for effective education (Mottet et al., 2006). The “effectiveness” of teacher rhetorical language and behaviors would ultimately be successful learning. Teachers attempt to craft messages, instructions, assignments, syllabi, and various instructional content to best fit their audience and encourage effective learning. This is the first step in effective teacher clarity. The research circled around this notion of effective presentation for decades. Later, I discuss the relational evolution of this concept as well as the disputed notion of teacher clarity as a construct. Trying to define an abstract thought such as clarity and what that looks like in the classroom can be difficult. One of the earlier pieces attributing particular qualities to clarity focused on the fact of clarity as “presentational clarity” (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). This begins the debate about what truly constitutes presentational clarity and what other processes might be happening in a classroom given that our pedagogy has changed over time.

The first attempts at defining teacher clarity behaviors in communication research involved synthesizing fifty different studies involving teaching characteristics. This included 11 different categories such as task orientation, enthusiasm, levels of questions, as well as clarity
(Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). “Clarity of presentation” is where the concept began to take form. Researchers at The Ohio State University began to explain specific teaching behaviors that would help reduce inference issues as well as categorize preferred teaching strategies. A variety of studies were conducted between 1975 and 1985, with the first study asking students to identify five things that their “clearest” teacher performs (Cruickshank et al., 1975). This study yielded 110 distinct behaviors of instructors placed into 12 categories. These categories include provide examples, demonstration of ideas, use a variety of teaching materials, teach in a step-by-step manner, repeat difficult points, adjust teaching to learner, help students organize, help students practice, provide clear rules, provide feedback, communicate for understanding, and prepare students for what is to be taught. Using this foundational categorization, additional researchers replicated the study coming to an agreement on several characteristics of clear teachers including being concerned with student understanding, provide appropriate opportunities to learn, provide examples, speak and write in an organized fashion, as well as assessing to see if learning truly happens (Bush, Kennedy, & Cruickshank, 1977; Hines, 1981; Kennedy, Cruickshank, Bush, Myers, 1978).

The continued fine-tuning of clarity and what it means meant using experimental studies in an attempt to demonstrate clear and unclear teaching practices. Land and Smith (1979a) attempted to explain what a clear versus an unclear lesson looks like with experimental design with two groups exposed to similar messages with “vagueness” as a determining variable. Vagueness is defined as a variation in word choice such using terms such as “might”, “some”, “probably”, “few”, “actually” for students. These words left some interpretation of what was meant by the instructor. The students exposed to the clear message achieved higher scores on the fourteen-item posttest. This specific isolation of vagueness as an element of teacher clarity shows
the rhetorical strategies that help facilitate learning and understanding. This research was continued by expanding the research to include vagueness, mazes, and unexplained content. This study found a cause-effect-relationship between lack of clarity and student achievement (Land & Smith, 1979b).

The researchers, Land and Smith, published more than five substantial studies in a six-year period laying the groundwork for teacher clarity research (Land, 1979; Land, 1981; Land & Smith, 1979a; Land & Smith, 1979b; Smith & Land, 1981). Throughout the studies, the emphasis on language, more specifically, vagueness, which is attributed to lack of clarity. The important note about these studies, is the lack of consideration about teaching behaviors outside of language chosen or omitted when giving a lecture. The common thread to clarity in this phase of teacher clarity research is the language choice as well as overall structure of a language exchange. Clarity is accomplished by avoiding vague terminology, false starts in speech, clear transitions, and avoiding unexplained content. Throughout the first decade of explored research on teacher clarity, researchers isolated specific characteristics that helped student learning. All of these studies examined the relationship language, terms, and language organization choices had on understanding in the classroom. Five variables explored in the research are vagueness, mazes, utterances, bluffing, and uncertainty (Land, 1981; Smith & Land, 1981). The main deviation from the Ohio State studies is a set of low inference variables, specifically the difference of clear and unclear language not explored in the previous studies. At this point, teacher clarity is built around the notion of a rhetorical structure built as a speech or a lecture. In addition to the study of language organization and word choice, the complexity of the syntax, technicality of the language, the inclusion of cues and signaling that aid comprehension, and word frequency (Britton, Glynn, Meyer, & Penland, 1982) started to emerge as a possible determinant of clarity.
This experimental study showed significant cognitive capacity needed with more complex syntax, technical terminology, and the lack of cues. After roughly twenty years of study from a centralized group of researchers an important development of clarity as a relational variable began to emerge.

**Disagreement in Definition of Construct**

The largest inconsistency in teacher clarity is the definition itself. Some claim clarity is anything but clear (Eisenberg, 1984). Others blame the lack of consensus on a definition as a reason clarity is not truly operationalized and that the field does not truly understand the phenomenon that is clarity (Bolkan, 2017a). Various explanations of teacher characteristics have been given to outline preferred behaviors of a clear teacher. The next step in the research attempted to focus more on the opportunities for response along with assessment, and asking for understanding. Cruickshank (1985) summarized behaviors into four categories including assessing student learning, which included giving specific details and finding out if learners understand content. Second, teachers provide opportunities to learn by using appropriate pace, providing explanations, giving time to think, repeating information. Third, teachers use examples to explain difficult concepts. Fourth, teachers review and organize information to help students understand what is next and how work should be done. The first point marks a new research thread specific to finding out if students understand content which is in stark contrast to the rhetorical nature studied so far over the first several decades.

In attempts to define clarity, researchers conducted studies asking for preferred characteristics of teachers. A recent study asked students to allocate an imaginary budget in one dollar increments up to ten dollars to ten separate effective teaching behaviors (assertiveness, responsiveness, clarity, relevant, competence, trustworthiness, caring, immediacy, humor,
This study was an attempt to categorize preferred teaching behaviors and didn’t examine effective learning or outcomes but tapped into an interesting preference of students if they could “build” their teachers characteristics from this brief list. Regardless of a budget of twenty dollars or sixty dollars depending on experiment groups, students allocated the most money to clarity (Goldman, Cranmer, Sollitto, Labelle, & Lancaster, 2017). This signals a desire to have clear teachers. However, the definition provided in this study even creates questions for how the students interpreted the prompt. The definition provided was “this instructor presents knowledge in a way that students understand, answers questions clearly, has clear course objectives, and is straightforward in lectures”. They treated clarity as a rhetorical variable using the definitions that explain clarity as verbal and nonverbal messages in a comprehensible and relatively easy way to understand material (Chesebro, 2003; Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Goldman et al., 2017).

More importantly clarity itself is unclear. Bush et al. (1977) acknowledged the fact that it is ambiguous and imprecise in definition. The commonly used definition of “being clear and easy to understand” presents a circular meaning and does not provide an easy way to measure or even observe. Often, the concept of high inference, intermediate inference, and low inference variables dictates how the variable is measured. High inference clarity variables include examples provided to participants as “being clear”. Intermediate inference includes less vague interpretations such as “organization” or “explanation”. Low inference variables include clear descriptions such as “used preview statement” or “answers student questions”. The measurement itself leaves interpretation for a research participant or researcher to determine what they define as clarity.
One of the most concerning aspects of teacher clarity disagreement came from faculty responses to the research on teacher clarity. While sharing the results of the National Wabash Study, several researchers spoke with faculty and students on 100 different campuses (Blaich et al., 2016). Faculty thought the idea of clarity was “dumbing down” their courses and simplifying information for students. They felt this took away from the rigor of the course. Students had a much more positive outlook encouraging reactive clarity tactics such as negotiating syllabi with students and asking them about the schedule and material throughout the semester. They also appreciate teachers who treat the learning environment as a mutual learning space. It is interesting to see the various responses to a term such as teacher clarity. This is the issue of how teacher clarity is a tough variable to define.

Teacher clarity as a variable started as an opportunity to define teacher characteristics that aided in student understanding. However, it evolved into potential attributes such as credibility and perceived age as a determinant of clarity (Kennedy et al., 1978). Teacher credibility is often noted as the most significant predictor of student affective learning but a recent study acknowledged that teacher clarity is a precursor to perceived teacher credibility (Zhang, 2011). Initial arguments of teacher clarity would not have attributed these characteristics as a precursor to effective teacher clarity. All of these reasons lead to lack of concise definitions of clarity research. However, if you continue to the second phrase of Cruickshank and Kennedy’s (1986) definition “a cluster of teacher behaviors that result in learners gaining knowledge or understanding of a topic, if they possess adequate interest, aptitude, opportunity, and time.” (p. 43), it introduced the concept of students possession of willingness to learn. This also introduced the concept of a model of communication and the field of experience that the student holds before the communication exchange even starts which would then strongly influence the ability
to accomplish clarity. It is imperative to understand that learning is dependent on existing understanding held by the student (Krahenbuhl, 2016). This applies to how they interpret clarity as well. It is important to understand the models of communication and their influence on clarity.

**Teacher Clarity as a Relational Process**

Early research focused on the organization, structure, and word choice from the message creator (Bolkan, 2017b). Research began to show the relationship with clarity of teacher behaviors and student learning based on relational variables (Civikly, 1992; Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Simonds, 1997). This shift to a relational variable is imperative to understand that communication goals are often multifaceted and complicated. If this conversation takes place in an educational setting such as a classroom, various communicators are present influencing a message and the related understanding at every turn. Messages can be loaded with multiple layers of information, intention, and interpretation (Eisenberg, 1984).

Oddly enough, the first mention in research literature addressing clarity comes from organizational communication literature, not citing any of the previous instructor clarity research. This drive came from an argument to discredit the overemphasis of clarity in organizational teaching and research (Eisenberg, 1984). The counterpoint to teacher clarity research came from the basic disagreement with clarity as a determining factor in organizational success. Research continued to study teachers using complicated wording and vagueness but started to consider variables such as wait time and the frequency of questions asked by a teacher (Gloeckner, 1983; Harris & Swick, 1985; Hines et al., 1985). This transition signaled an understanding that teacher clarity behaviors involve engaging the student and having them be a part of the instructional equation. Hines et al. (1985) suggest that three of the factors most significantly related to learner achievement were asking for understanding, answering student
questions appropriately, and stopping to let students think. This signified a substantial shift in
definition about how the student will begin to signal confusion or lack of understanding. The
classroom plays a part in how the instructor continues an instructional exchange based on their
questions and the teacher’s satisfaction with the assessment of knowledge through questions.

Interestingly, clarity had been discussed in the literature prior to the Rosenshine and
Furst’s (1971) synthesis. Wright and Nuthall (1970) explored the skills of teachers who did a
variety of things including asking relatively direct questions, involves more students by
redirecting each question to several students, and makes frequent use of appreciation for student
responses. These were identified as significant predictors of student achievement. Oddly enough,
the term clarity appeared only once in the Wright and Nuthall (1970) manuscript alongside
vagueness, one of the major tenants of The Ohio State studies. This indicated that researchers
had isolated clarity as a rhetorical variable in certain research circles but the research as a
relational variable continued as a focus with a different definition or research question. Those
two viewpoints began to merge in the 1980’s.

Cruickshank and Kennedy (1986) synthesized the past two decades of clarity research
acknowledging that clarity was not the intended research of articles addressing questions of
student interaction. The inherent objective of teacher clarity research was and still is effective
presentation clarity. The ultimate catalyst to new research encouraged the relationship between
clarity research and the inhibitors of clarity. Not clearly defined, this expanded the notion that
certain variables may, in fact, create misunderstanding regardless of the rhetorical and
organizational clarity of the instructor.

A triad of studies sought to examine the role of the receiver in a communication
exchange. Eisenberg argued clarity occurs to the extent that the following conditions are met: (1)
an individual has an idea; (2) he or she encodes the idea into language; and (3) the receiver understands the message as it was intended by the source (1984). Kendrick and Darling (1990) started to describe the nature of when an individual does not understand something they will use a variety of tactics which include asking for help, asking for additional information, asking for specific information, checking their understanding through a simple questions, or ignoring the situation. Kendrick (1987) started the research by defining how lack of clarity can happen through misunderstandings and non-understandings. Misunderstandings happen when an individual develops a point differently from the intent of the message. Nonunderstanding happens when the receiver finds no intent from the message. The receiver will then use “clarifying tactics” to understand the message. These tactics include ignoring, having the teacher elaborate, asking for an example, asking for the teacher to rephrase, asking the teacher to repeat, asking for specific information, indicating confusion through nonverbal and verbal cues, and checking understanding. Students indicated using these tactics in a variety of different settings depending on the relationship with the teacher, the environment, the class size, the identity of the sender, and the weight of the problem experienced (Darling, 1989; Kendrick, 1987; Kendrick & Darling, 1990). Ultimately, “pro-social” teaching behaviors such as clarity which deals with teachers making strides to help students understand what they are trying to teach is the first step in accomplishing clarity (McCroskey et al., 2006, p. 404). These pro-social behaviors are redefined as rhetorical components for the sake of this literature review. Figure 3 articulates the convergence of these ideas. The rhetorical teacher behaviors are the foundational component of what successful communication strategies should look like as outlined in the first few studies of clarity. Using the clarifying tactics, student feedback begins to account for things that happen in the classroom to help with understanding issue. The teacher then provides answers to questions,
expands on ideas, or takes some type of clarifying strategy to help students understand. The student then provides confirmation of understanding or asks for more clarity. Finally, the teacher assesses formally or informally if the student truly understands. The process then begins again. This cyclical process is never ending in the process of understanding clarity. This circular pattern finally began to take shape once researchers questioned the nature of clarity and what role all participants had in the process.

**Figure 3. Clarity Process**

Models of Communication

Communication can be broken down into three definable models of communication: linear/actional, relational/interactional, and transactional. This is not the exhaustive list of communication models, but they can be summarized in this fashion.

**Linear/Actional**

Linear communication is described as a rhetorical distribution of a message. This model of communication treats communication as a one way sending of a message. There is one sender
and one receiver. The Shannon and Weaver (1949) model of communication finds its roots in mathematics and physics research. When speaking of linear communication, it was the basis of transmission of signal that gives commands to most likely a computer or a radio transmission. Human communication is much more complex. For example, a message posted on a community bulletin board may or may not be received by any receiver. The message was transmitted, and communication had been accomplished. This is where these models stop in the explanation of how communication occurs.

**Relational/Interactional**

The second iteration of communication models rejected the idea of a one-way transmission and decoding of messages. The next step was to add feedback as a key element in understanding how people made sense of messages. The word communication comes from the Latin communis, which means common. The next models of communication focused on the commonality created in messages. Feedback was a crucial element in telling the transmitter how the messages were being received (Schramm, 1965). These models consider the initial message but show a two-way back and forth exchange to help adjust and correct the messages being encoded and decoded.

**Transactional**

Communication models evolved over time from a mathematical transmission to receiving feedback to examine the process as a complex and dynamic system of communication features. The transactional model of communication clarifies communication as a process of shared messages and understandings between two or more individuals (Duck & McMahon, 2009). More specifically, people encode and decode initial transmission messages in a constant process affected by various other elements. Then feedback occurs simultaneously allowing for changes
in the message. Interference creates boundaries and obstacles for successful decoding.

Communication is a transactional process involving a “cognitive sorting, selecting, and sending of symbols in such a way as to help a listener elicit from [their] own mind a meaning or response similar to that intended by the communicator” (Ross, 1977, p. 14). As described in the introduction, these six elements of transactional communication can help explain a lot of the variance in understanding of what clarity is and how it happens.

**Components of Transactional Model**

As described in the introduction to this study, the transactional model can be simplified into six elements (Barnlund, 1962; Barnlund, 1970): people, message, channel, interference, feedback, and relational context. Using the definitions of rhetorical and relational, I argue three are rhetorical in nature and three are relational in nature based on how research has studied the constructs. However, after the description of rhetorical and relational component, the overlap of these components must be discussed. These six elements of the transactional model are not mutually exclusive and do not sit alone as rhetorical or relational constructs. This section of the literature review is to provide an overview of how they can be understood and how literature could explain their role within the transactional model. Understanding the definition and complexity of this help guide a better understanding of what clarity as a transactional process looks like.

**Rhetorical Components of Transactional Model**

This research study is an attempt to classify and determine clarity behaviors within six elements described in the transactional model of communication. I argue three elements are rhetorical in nature and three are relational in nature. The three classified as rhetorical include message, channel, and people.
Message

I want to emphasize the incredible research completed thus far on teacher clarity as a focus on the message creation choices that instructors use to accomplish clarity. The word choice, the repetition of instructions, the scaffolding of directions, the elimination of jargon, and a large majority of teacher clarity research focuses on the message itself. There is no question that message creation can be the basis of a considerable number of misunderstandings. Other examples include teaching in a step-by-step manner, using appropriate pace, presenting logically, explaining content, and allowing time to process, informing students of lesson objectives prior to teaching, and various other examples provided above in the rhetorical message creation part of the literature review (Hines, Cruickshank, & Kennedy, 1985). The process of clarity is first accomplished by using rhetorical strategies that encourage understanding.

Channel

One important element of teacher clarity is the channel differences. The initial work based its finding on “lecture” based classrooms in a face-to-face setting with a one-way teaching process of teachers instructing with little interaction from students. Researchers are beginning to understand how discussion-based classrooms, flipped classrooms, as well as non-lecture-based settings can affect the clarity process. Even lecture based classrooms have multiple studies exploring the nature of notetaking in relation to cognitive learning, affective learning, and the importance of notes in accomplishing clarity (Pinter, Merritt, Berry, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2018; Titsworth, 2001; Titsworth, 2004; Titsworth, Novak, Hunt, & Meyer, 2004; Titsworth et al., 2015; Wang, Pascarella, Laird, & Ribera, 2015). Building on the research of particular transitions and cues, this research specifically focused on lecture cues assisting students in listening and notetaking which then resulted in students recording more details and points when
the cues were present. However, transcription of lecture material by a student does not necessarily translate to clarity or understanding of the material. It does provide a brief glimpse into the cognitive processing students participate in that may or may not lead to clarification tactics. Very little research focuses on the various channels in which clarity can accomplish whether it is the channel medium such as electronic or face to face or the delivery channel such as lecture, experiential, discussion, etc. The process of clarity is accomplished by using channels that promote the easiest understanding for the receiver.

**People**

Teacher clarity focuses on the behaviors of teachers and how they prepare for class and create messages that are easy to understand. However, one of the original definitions includes an element (people) of the transactional model in the process of accomplishing clarity. It was noted consistently that teachers do certain things to accomplish clarity. Remember, teacher clarity can be defined as “a cluster of teacher behaviors that result in learners gaining knowledge or understanding of a topic” (Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986). This was evident in much of the research that outlined and described “clusters of teaching behaviors” that included explaining, providing examples, verbal and nonverbal cues, organizational structure, etc. All of these are a focus on the instructor and how they deliver a message and does not extend to the interaction of students. I am not discounting the three above referenced variable characteristics. The process of clarity is first accomplished by using rhetorical strategies that encourage understanding. But that understanding might also be influenced by the relationship between the people involved in the process, which includes the teacher as well as the students. However, it is incredibly important to view the instructor and students as both the sender and receiver of messages. Teacher clarity cannot only look at teacher messages because of the influence of all these additional factors. The
people and elements involved show this shift from a simply rhetorical variable. But the emphasis in this section is how the literature often explains what the research defined as desired rhetorical characteristics of a teacher. And yet, the relationship between teachers and students will influence communication events. It is important to note that I classify people as rhetorical in this literature review. I argue however there is a relationship component that will influence the perception of the communication encounter. The people also offer feedback, have interacting experiences and communication, as well as act as the listener not solely the sender of a message. This differentiation between relational and rhetorical will lead to a more encompassing transactional communication component.

**Relational Components of Transactional Model**

This research study is an attempt to classify and determine clarity behaviors within six elements described in the transactional model of communication. I argue three elements are rhetorical in nature and three are relational in nature. The three elements classified as relational include interference, relational context, and feedback.

**Interference**

Barriers in communication can come in many forms. Receivers of messages are exposed to a great deal of signals in one environment and those signals can be combined, eliminated emphasized, and create a new meaning (Westley & MacLean, 1955). It is shortsighted to believe clarity is accomplished with just the rhetorical devices determined in previous research. Clarity can be affected by a number of things that can be out of the control of the sender of any message. Any communication model must examine the extent to which messages are interfered with. Interference can take place in three specific forms: physical, psychological, or semantic (Devito, 1991). Physical noise is the actual noise that can be heard and might overtake the message being
heard or seen. An object such as being unable to read a projection screen because of small print or the sound of loud cars or people talking overtake the message. Psychological interference deal with cognitive or mental interference that might include one’s bias, closed mindedness to the conversation, or psychological factors unrelated to the speaker or message such and hunger, boredom, or lack of focus. Semantic interference deals with speaker and listener assigning different meaning to the message such as jargon that may have different meaning for the listener and the context clues provide little guidance. Clarity not only involves how a sender puts together a rhetorical message transmission but also how they eliminate and minimize interference.

**Context**

Often, notions and ideas are formulated at the onset of a communication relationship (Stewart, 1972). However, those relationships change the environment in which the message is received. Teachers on the first day of class and on the last day of class have a different relational context with their students. The teacher on the last day of class has less burden in establishing a clear rhetorical message because the relationship with students has developed over time to better understand the delivery, content, and processes of the message creator (teacher). Even on something used for assessment of knowledge, the first test in a class is the hardest test for the students unfamiliar with the preference of the teacher, the word choice, the types of questions, how to prepare, and even the focus of the exam. After the exam, the relational context in teacher/student understanding has developed. The relational aspect could easily be included with people. How they each create meaning to the relationship and grow the relationship can be a determining factor. The context of instruction such as the environment bleeds into the channel as well. Considering what might be happening in their lives is another consideration. Keep in mind,
this is a brief primer to how the elements of the transactional model might be explained. Clarity not only involves how a sender puts together and transmit a rhetorical message but also how they maximize relational environments to encourage clarity.

**Feedback**

Students and teachers engage in a socialization process that involves students participating in behaviors that reduce uncertainty that allows the classroom to grow relationally (Simonds, 2001). Feedback in a classroom can cause self-correcting behaviors on behalf of the instructor based on adapting to the audience’s nonverbal and verbal communication. If a teacher looks out into the classroom and sees confused nonverbal cues, they might restate or repeat the initial message. If a student asks a question it shows the clarity was not accomplished through just the rhetorical message created. From a transmission point, feedback is a signal that bounces off the receiver and allows the sender to correct or refine the signal (Ross, 1977). Clarity not only involves how a sender creates and transmits a rhetorical message but also allows for feedback and response to that feedback.

The next section outlines how relational and rhetorical constructs overlap and have very close similarities. This continues to argument of a more transactional view of how clarity works. Again, the section above is to act as a primer for the conversation about transactional elements using relational and rhetorical dichotomy as a conversation point. It will be helpful to have this breakdown when answering the research questions specific to these elements.

**Overlap of Relational/Rhetorical Constructs**

In the attempt to simplify the descriptions of each part of the transactional model and how they align with rhetorical/relational clarity, it is important to note that there is overlap. Take for example, the construct people identified as a rhetorical element. The relational element will
have influence on this part of the model. However, the argument made here is that message, channel, and people can be researched in only a rhetorical way. For example, during a lecture a teacher can stand at the front of the room and use one channel, one message, and be the only one encoding messages. This is where a large majority of the initial research focused on what determines clear teaching behaviors (Bush, Kennedy, & Cruickshank, 1977; Hines, 1981; Kennedy, Cruickshank, Bush, & Myers, 1978). These can be rhetorical only in nature but could potentially have relational qualities and be affected by relational constructs.

However, the other three, interference, relational context, and feedback cannot be rhetorical in nature. They are dependent on an initial message to give feedback to, to have interferred with and a minimum of two people to construct a relational construct. So in short, all 6 elements can become relational and transactional comonents, however not all can be rhetorical. Use the age old example of all bourbon is whiskey, but not all whiskey is bourbon to help visualize what is being said. All rhetorical constructs can become relational but relational constructs cannot become rhetorical. This differentiation guides the idea of how rhetorical constructs are the foundational elements of what happens in accomplishing clarity but the relational components transform how we use rhetorical components in a transactional process.

Teacher Clarity Influenced by Other Factors

Simonds (1997) and Civikly (1992) created a strong argument about how the process of communication involves several interrelated variables, in which students take part. Simonds (1997) summarized the concerns of research as two neglected areas of study. First, it does not account for the nature of clarity as a process, which is much more than presenting content alone. Second, the aspect of a relational construct definition is missing from the literature. These calls
change the landscape of what it means for teachers and students to share in the responsibility of classroom clarity.

Recent studies asked about the role of student perceptions in teacher clarity and the role that had on their ability to learn. Linvill and Cranmer (2017) suggested that particular individuals with different learning styles may find clarity traits less effective based on the content of teaching methods and combination of environmental factors. For example, students who were “exposed to clear and organized instruction during the first year of college may contribute to student persistence at a particular institution by enhancing students’ satisfaction with the education being received” (Loes and Pascarella, 2015, p. 8). These students might view clarity in a different way. Students not exposed to clear organization might have a lower satisfaction that impacted future interactions with teachers and how they view clarity. This experiential background of the student is crucial to understand how students perceive clarity. This signals the idea that not one particular clarity strategy can be used to accomplish clarity for all individuals. Teacher clarity was founded on the idea that particular core behaviors must be present. That may not be the case.

There are rarely qualitative studies dealing with teacher clarity. Quantitative analysis is the most common approach to teacher clarity (Titsworth et al., 2015). The research shows strong relationships between cognitive and affective learning, engagement, student retention, and variety of desired student outcomes (Bolkan, 2016; Rodger, Murray, & Cummings, 2007; Wang et al., 2015). However, studies focused on teacher behaviors and students then responded to those predetermined scales. Possibly, those behaviors have changed. Students may view clarity differently based on the delivery method of the course. Students may feel they have a role in accomplishing clarity through individual or group means. The lack of qualitative studies cited in
this review because of their lack of existence and the need to update the perceptions students have of teacher clarity, were the driving force behind this dissertation. Teacher clarity research provides a great deal of insight as to what teachers can do rhetorically to help students understand material, but less so in terms of the relational component involved in the process.

Once again, the goal of this study was to build on the research of rhetorical teacher clarity constructs and explore those through transactional elements showing that the various factors outside of the teacher may affect clarity and understanding. A qualitative study can be used to uncover strategies, techniques, and practices of highly effective teachers (Worthington, 2013). The research outlined throughout the review of literature provides a framework for defining clarity. But the next step is to connect that to various other elements of the clarity and understanding process.

In short, measurement began by asking students what characteristics made a teacher “clear” (Cruickshank et al., 1975), observation of teaching behaviors through video observation study (Hines et al., 1985), and then numerous scales which ask for student perceptions of predetermined teaching characteristics (Bolkan, 2017a; Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998; Powell & Harville, 1990; Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997; Simonds, 1997). All of these serve a purpose in understanding the complex workings of being clear. It is imperative to understand the updated perceptions of students using qualitative research to report what characteristics students attribute to a clear teacher.

Chapter Summary

There is a clear need to continue the conversation about how teacher clarity works, in what settings it differs, how students perceive the quality, and ultimately what behaviors students perceive as clear. Students must be asked about their role as well. Teacher clarity (Rosenshine &
Furst, 1971) and questions about misunderstandings (Wright & Nuthall, 1970) seemed to take two separate paths in the research resulting in disparate views of the construct. The call for understanding the relationship and the process involved in evolving classrooms will help justify the need to understand teacher clarity behaviors. It will also help educators find ways to give students the sense of control and responsibility over their understanding in the classroom.

Moving forward it is important to understand the growth of how teacher clarity is understood and accomplished in the classroom. Students’ perceptions of what clarity is in the classroom may never fully be defined into particular actions that a teacher can accomplish. Rhetorically, teachers can take on various functions to help accomplish clarity, but it does not ensure clarity will be accomplished. Students can participate in particular actions and functions that help accomplish clarity and their role in the education process, once again, does not ensure clarity. Teacher clarity must be defined more as an instructional exchange between at least two parties to accomplish the goal of understanding.

Teacher clarity is defined by a considerable number of scholars as the rhetorical process teachers use to design clear messages and aid in student learning. However, I argue this is only a part of the clarity process. Teacher clarity as a rhetorical construct might be a prerequisite to understanding, but the other dimensions need focus as well. The models of communication evolved from a linear to transactional model indicating the need for a better understanding of how communication is a complex process with various factors influencing decoding of a message to align with the initial encoded message. Teacher clarity definition debates continue based on the rhetorical versus relational paradigm. The attempt to define clarity as a transactional process falls in line with the evolution of how communication models vary and fluctuate over
time as we understand more of the dynamics. Teacher clarity is a rhetorical, relational, and transactional process.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe in detail the components of the study including methodology, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and interview process. The overall purpose of this study was to determine the elements of teacher clarity through the lens of transactional communication described by student perceptions using student statements. I had two guiding research questions. Research question two includes seven sub questions using the transactional communication model as guiding framework.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do students describe instructional clarity in the classroom?

RQ2: What elements affect the transactional process of teacher clarity?

Sub-RQ2.1: How do students describe clear teachers (People)?

Sub-RQ2.2: What particular teacher behaviors are identified as accomplishing clarity (Message)?

Sub-RQ2.3: What pedagogical processes and environments are identified as allowing clarity (Channel)?

Sub-RQ2.4: What interferes with clarity being accomplished (Interference)?

Sub-RQ2.5: What role do students perceive they play in accomplishing clarity in the classroom (Feedback)?

Sub-RQ2.6: How is clarity accomplished with different relational contexts between student and teacher (Context)?

Sub-RQ2.7: What relationship do students and teachers have that lead to clarity (People and Context)?
Research Design and Rationale

Constructivist Paradigm

Realities are constructed by each individual and constructivism emphasizes human interpretation and meaning making of lived experiences (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2016). This approach was crucial to help understand those realities and then help analyze a process. I needed to acknowledge that realities are made by people including myself as a researcher (Charmaz, 2006). This would then help construct and interpret these realities would be a helpful approach to understand the construct of clarity. In this case, the constructed realities of the participants and then my interpretation of those realities constructed a detailed description of the process/construct of instructional clarity. Constructivist paradigms shape research in which people construct reality based on how they see the world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2019; Yin, 2016). The realities of each participant and the reality of the researchers affect the outcome of a study. The guiding principle of this research was to find varying perspectives in order to look for common themes across participants that shape the reality of how students perceive teacher clarity. Constructivist or interpretive paradigms suggest the socially constructed reality that involves self-reflexive research helps “make sense” of an abstract construct or process (Weick, 2001). It was essential to select a paradigm that would support the amplification of participants’ voices into a collective description of the construct of teacher clarity.

The phenomenon (teacher clarity), or locus of study, was already known and this research was an attempt to clarify and better understand through lived experiences and perceptions (Tracy, 2019). This study was not an attempt to define a new phenomenon but rather redefine and reexamine this construct. Teacher clarity has been well understood that the instructional variable exists. However, a greater exploration of simply “what is going on here?” (Lindlof &
Taylor, 2011) was needed to help better understand the student definition of teacher clarity. The
etic knowledge best described teacher clarity as a rhetorical construct. In short, if teachers do
certain clarity tactics, students will learn more. It did not account for student interaction,
perception, or what students define as clear roles. This call for an expanded examination of
teacher clarity as a construct needed a new interpretation of data from student perspectives to
help construct a more expansive, coherent, and theory to explain teacher clarity as a process
(Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The study took a closer look at an updated description of rhetorical
teaching strategies students prefer and what role they perceive they and other classmates play in
accomplishing clarity. In terms of methods, this study applied a more comprehensive definition
of perceptions of teacher clarity through the collection, organization, and analysis of data to
explore teacher clarity. The method was a construction of “what is happening here” in terms of
instructional clarity through lived experiences of the participants (Glaser, 1978). This was the
most beneficial way to analyze and organize an answer to that question.

Through a grounded theory approach with a defined iterative analysis (Charmaz, 2006;
Tracy, 2019) it was the intent of this research study to investigate and analyze data to enrich
definitions, perceptions, and student response to teacher clarity using the six elements of
transactional communication. Grounded theory helped guide the practice of collecting data
through simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis, constructing analytic codes
from the data rather than preconceived hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It also allowed the
use of constant comparative analysis to generate themes during the data analysis and review
(Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). The focus of the study was to explore clarity as a transactional
process. I needed a methodology that would allow for qualitative research focused on creating
conceptual frameworks through inductive analysis grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006).
Although theoretical assumptions have been made regarding transactional communication and teacher clarity as a rhetorical and relational construct, it was uncertain at the beginning of the study how students would describe the nature of clarity through the lens of those six elements. Interview participation provided the discovery of the conditions that define a particular action or event through lived experience. More importantly, the iterative analysis is a flexible, yet guided approach, of finding theory in the data itself (Charmaz, 2006; Tracy, 2019).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The study was an attempt to explore the construct of teacher clarity through student perceptions. I used three data collection sources in an attempt to produce similar results from various sources to strengthen the credibility of the study. A survey conducted via an online platform, in person focus group interviews, and a review of focus group transcripts by participants. Each step of the collection is outline below.

Survey

The initial survey was sent to participants to collect responses to open ended questions addressing the two research questions. The survey can be found in Appendix A. The survey was an opportunity for the research to begin the data immersion phase and the primary cycle of coding (Glaser, 1992; Tracy, 2019). I used the survey responses to help guide follow up questions during the focus group interviews. The surveys also provided an additional source of data to utilize during the constant comparative analysis of emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006). After making initial codes from the survey, I conducted several focus group interviews. Due to the nature of the data collection the surveys and focus groups happened simultaneously allowing me to be involved in data analysis continually.
Questions were created using the transactional communication model. I used the six tenets of the model (people, message, channel, interference, feedback, context) as guiding principles for what should be asked. These open-ended questions did not pull from previous teacher clarity research but more of an attempt to understand how clarity could be examined through the lens of a communication process. In Appendix A the questions are aligned with which research question they address. These were created after the focus group questions to help echo responses and create another data point for analysis.

Focus Groups

Focus group facilitation asks for the experiences, interpretations, and definitions of participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) through open ended and broad questioning allowing for probing questions to explore inconsistencies. Focus groups are successful in education research and study of university students to allow for the joint exploration of a concept that may be difficult to explain oneself (Gasper-Hulvat, 2018; Robb & Dunn, 2017; Zarei, Saeidi, & Ahangari, 2019). Focus groups allow individuals to share those lived experiences and openly share ideas and concerns about the definitions of teacher clarity. The benefit of focus group data collection helped coordinate an interaction between participants to produce concepts that might not have emerged without the presence of others who have experienced similar situations. These focus groups provided an opportunity to share experiences and perceptions of what teacher clarity look like. Students participate in classroom interactions together and were able to share and build upon each other’s ideas of what they interpret as teacher clarity by exploring those together in a focus group. A sole interview might lack the complexity of understanding a dynamic of multiple students without having the multiple students to discuss. Understanding that this constructivist approach which deals with interpretation of the
meanings and perceptions explored helped define the design of qualitative research. The intent of this research was to show the multiple perspectives of how teacher clarity components vary based on various elements. Students as well as teachers create their own understanding of what clarity is and how to accomplish clarity.

The focus groups helped to explore the meaning and create central terms used by the participants as well as create a conceptual network from the data (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). The central terms and components of rhetorical teacher clarity research is known and well researched. However, creating a new network of how those are interrelated to student perceived ability to interact and be a part of the clarity process is necessary to expand teacher clarity research. The individual responses and narratives created through focus groups helped to define and centralize a common theme of what it means to see and participate in clarity in instructional settings. Through this conceptual model and iterative approach, a more expansive definition of how students define teacher clarity and play a role in the relational process was provided. True constructivist approach understand that knowledge and meaning are developed through different social lenses (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The social lenses are the experiences and definitions provided by the participants as well as the researchers interpretation of those experiences. The questions help explain how students see these actions playing out in the classroom.? The entire focus group interview schedule is provided in Appendix B. The questions were created using the transactional communication model. I used the six tenets of the model (people, message, channel, interference, feedback, context) as guiding principles for what should be asked. These open-ended questions did not pull from previous teacher clarity research but more of an attempt to understand how clarity could be examined through the lens of a communication process. In Appendix B the questions are aligned with which research question they address.
A semi-structured interview was used which included open ended questions with follow up, clarification, or probing questions, as well as exploratory questions to better understand the groups conversation (Roulston, DeMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). The focus group involved a 60-minute or less session led by one facilitator. The facilitator asked questions as well as took notes. Using the semi-structured interview schedule, I first welcomed the participants, described the research, and made sure they stay until they have received their compensation. During the focus groups, I recorded the conversation with the permission of everyone present in the room. The audio recordings were transcribed after all of the focus groups were completed. During the answers to the questions, I took notes of key responses and made note of themes that emerged during the conversation. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for eleven research based questions having the researcher serve as more of a facilitator of a conversation and can use follow up or probing questions if necessary (Roulston et al., 2003; Tracy, 2019). I informed the participants that I encourage more of a dialog between their peers, and I was to act as facilitator to move on to more questions. The focus group took on average from 33-48 minutes. The nature of the semi-structured interview allowed for some flexibility in how the questions were asked. There was a total of 11 main questions with 8 follow up or directed questions. At times during the interviews students would cover additional areas outside of the question asked that covered what would be asked in a future question. I asked for additional comments if necessary. Each of the main questions focused on one of the seven sub questions of research question two yielded 6-10 minutes of conversation based on the different focus groups. After the focus group was completed, I thanked them for their time.
Transcript Commenting

This final stage of the research resulted in four participants. Three individuals were focus group members and one was an individual who could not attend their scheduled focus group and agreed to help in this fashion. They were recruited via a final question in the focus group conversation and then sent the link to the Qualtrics platform with the guiding questions and copy of the transcript. Each focus group interview was transcribed, and all participant data was made anonymous. This would be anonymous to other individuals but not the researcher. Their identities were kept confidential through the anonymizing process. Individuals who participated in the focus group interviews were provided a transcript of the interviews along with notes from the interview, if they volunteered for this part of the research. The transcript was a combination of all six focus group interviews. The member did not have to participate in a focus group interview. Individuals who did not participate in the focus groups or survey stage had the opportunity to participate. Members of the focus groups were asked at the end of the focus group about their interest to help with the third stage. If they indicated interest, they were sent the Qualtrics survey to record their responses. Using the similar questions of the survey provided in advance, individuals made comments on the transcript. This stage of the data collection allowed for additional members to reflect on the emergent themes. The process of member reflection allows additional viewpoints that may have been overlooked in the first data collection measures (Tracy, 2019). This data collection strategy is not member checking where participants comment on the emergent themes and verify. The participants used the questions in Appendix C to guide response. The open-ended questions direct them to the transcripts and asked them to make comments and critique what is found. Sometimes in surveys and focus groups, data can be lost in the conversation or the structure of the questions. With this method participants can see other
student comments and add narrative and deeper context to what is happening. In addition, to this additional method of data collection it helps with the idea of unintended formulations made by the researcher. Formulations include statements that the focus group moderator might use to delete and transform information produced by the speakers (Roulston et al., 2003). Using the comments provided from participants, I used member reflection to allow for sharing and dialoguing with participants about findings, themes, and emphasize of key ideas (Tracy, 2019; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Finally, how does this data collection stage act as data collection and not simply data analysis. The participants and the guided questions did not focus on the themes generated but ask for additional insight to what they see happening in the focus groups. Data collection involves the appearance of new sources of information to help generate themes in relation to the questions of the study. This stage of the data collection asked participants to expand on the comments made by peers and not simply reaffirm my themes. The member reflection process added space for additional insight and credibility. I had four participants comment on the transcripts.

Recruitment

After securing Institutional Review Board Approval, I initiated a campus wide research request email sent to all undergraduate and graduate students at both institutions I am affiliated with. On March 29th, 2021, an email (Appendix E) invited students to the survey method. The link was provided to the Qualtrics survey. They were able to register for a focus group slot at the end if they wanted to. This took them to a signupgenius.com page with available focus group dates and times in late April/early May. A second recruitment email was sent out on April 8th, 2021 (Appendix F) with the same signupgenius.com link to sign up for the focus groups. They provided their name and email address to be contacted to conduct the focus group via Zoom due
to COVID-19 protocols. The sign up did not show personal information to the public but only showed slots available and that were already selected. The signup allowed for 7 total participants per focus group. There was no attempt to categorize individuals based on particular demographics, experience, or knowledge level. I conducted those who signed up via email with the link to a zoom meeting and a calendar reminder. I reminded them via email the day before the focus group time slot. The only determining factor was availability and interest in participating in the focus group. The recruitment for the member reflections was facilitated by questions at the end of the focus group and informal conversations. All informed consents, protocols, and recruitments are provided in the Appendices.

**Participants**

Participants included college students from small and mid-sized cities in the Midwest. As an employee at a small, private institution and a student at a larger, public institution, the recruitment included students from both institutions. The public institution has just over 18,000 undergraduate and 2500 graduate students. 25% of the students come from underrepresented backgrounds and a graduation rate of just over 67%. The private institution has just over 4500 undergraduate students and 1300 graduate students. 30% of their students come from underrepresented backgrounds. The graduation rate is just under 60%. The recruitment was focused on these two institutions because of the researchers’ access to the population but there was no guarantee or mechanism to check if they belonged currently to these institutions. The recruitment method involved a campus wide research request email, word of mouth from fellow instructors, as well as a social media request. Recruitment involves finding a diverse sample to generate conversation of ideas that may be difficult to explain by oneself.
The study resulted in 30 participants in six different focus groups. Those enrolled in college or enrolled in the past qualify for this research. No prerequisite other than college experience was necessary. The study also involved two additional data sources to help with reliability of the findings. The initial stage involved a survey administered through an online survey platform yielding 175 participant responses. The recruitment involved the same as the focus groups. Finally, participants were asked to review the focus group transcripts and notes. This involved four transcript review responses. Each method of data collection and the process utilized is described in depth in the following sections. Again, the transcript reading allowed participants the chance to comb through the transcripts of the focus groups and provide brief responses to guided questions. It helped provide another checkpoint in my data analysis. Outlined below are various details of the education, race, educational experiences, and age of the participants in the survey and the focus groups. There is no demographic information collected for the transcript readers.

The requirement to have college experience focused the target demographic. However, the charts below show that the majority of participants were working on a bachelor’s or associates degree. The minority included those with a bachelor’s degree pursuing higher education. One thing to not is the similarity in percentages of each group within the focus group and the survey group seemed to be similar in terms of education, race, age, and educational experience.
Table 1. Participant Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Survey (%)</th>
<th>Focus Group (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some college but no degree</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree in college (2-year)</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Participant Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Survey (%)</th>
<th>Focus Group (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Listed under other include Spanish, Latino/Hispanic, Lebanese, Arab, Hispanic, South Asian, Mediterranean

Table 3. Participant Educational Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Experience</th>
<th>Survey (%)</th>
<th>Focus Group (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face to Face Lecture</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to Face Discussion Based Class</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to Face Lab</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Course</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table Continues)
Table 3, Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th></th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid Course</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course taught by a teaching assistant</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Other Text Comments include Online lab, Online Asynchronous, study abroad, Online Discussion Based Class, Zoom class lecture, Zoom class discussion based, independent study.

Table 4. Participant Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th></th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-65</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection and Simultaneous Coding

One important distinction to make about this study is the data collection and data analysis happened simultaneously. During the three phases of data collection, codes were generated in my working codebook as outlined in the next section. Each stage of the process involved a unique collection strategy of informal survey questions, focus group exploration, and participants added comments and details to the focus group transcripts.

Data Analysis

The coding process began with the data immersion phase. This familiarization stage occurs simultaneously during the data collection phase through listening to the responses, taking notes, and making initial codes through the exposure to the conversation (Patton, 2015; Tracy,
For this study, looking at survey responses helped add focus group questions and context when focus group questions did not prompt responses. After the survey method, I had a handful of codes and notes to begin identifying similarities found during the focus groups. During the focus group stage, the transcription of the material helped justify the multiple themes generated. Throughout the focus group process, I participated in the conversation and started to make note of themes and generalized ideas. The facilitation notes, recordings, and transcriptions were set aside as a beginning stage to code. The member reflections (transcript commenting) of the transcripts provided a quick overview of themes that are important and potentially missed by the researcher. These preliminary themes from the initial stage of coding included instructions, expectations, relationships, scaffolding, teacher/student interaction, transparency, messages, context, channel, and obstacles. These initial codes provided the next step to compare/contrast those member reflections and my data analysis.

Table 6 provides a visual overview of the data analysis process and timeline. The first part of the analysis was examining data collected during the survey sent to participants. These results provided initial data to construct codes in the initial coding phase. The second part of the data collection included focus group interviews. Using the notes and initial reactions to the focus group conversations, I used first-level codes that help define “what” is present in the data (Tracy, 2019).

**Open Coding**

The open coding process uses inductive categories created that emerge through the analysis and are not predetermined (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). After compiling an initial code book from the notes, I began to examine the transcripts and focus group notes to add to the confirmability of the initial codes. Once the codebook was completed with initial codes, I moved
on to axial coding. The organization and indexing of the data unfolded in various stages as exposure to the transcription increases. I used an inductive coding process using constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This process is defined as continual creation of analytic distinctions allowing for comparisons and contradictions in themes created. Open coding was performed to identify particular themes and concepts that are evident in the responses. More specifically, the attempt to categorize data and how the elements generate themes involves exposure over a period of time as well as multiple attempts at understanding the data. The open coding process was completed after two rounds of reading the notes and initial reaction to the responses. After creating an initial pattern of themes generated from the data, I moved on to the transcripts, notes, and member reflections.

Table 5. Initial Coding Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Delivery Modality</th>
<th>Ambiguity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Actions</td>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>Repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Actions</td>
<td>Obstacles</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Type of Class</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Message Characteristics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once I read through the transcripts two times, I consulted the two separate working codebooks that I had. I merged common themes and categories to create my mutual codebook. The reason for the two codebooks is to have initial data to examine from open ended questions through the conversational data from the focus groups, and from the transcript read through to create a grouping of those themes to potential validate common themes.

Axial Coding

Once the initial codes were put aside from the initial coding, I used the same process of open coding to categorize themes present in the data yielding concepts that were then grouped into categories.
With the mutual codebook codes finalized, I began the axial coding process which involved examining the data in new ways and making connections between the multiple categories. I further defined my codebook by having initial codes, the definition of that code, indicators that might flag something that belongs in that code, qualifications/exclusions, and finally put examples in to help guide any questions I might have. After further review of all three data sets, I began applying the codes. The axial coding process involves moving beyond a broad selection of codes to understand the interconnection of these themes. I accomplished this through the process of eliminating duplicate or similar responses. A centralized meaning was created by interpreting the data from multiple data sources (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Using the transcripts and facilitation notes along with the inductive codes provided, I began to create a conceptual network mapping out the connections and themes present in the data.

I developed the codes through multiple forms of data using an inductive and iterative process and then revisited and refined the material, then I applied the codes. During this process, I made sure to have ongoing conversations with my dissertation committee and debriefed about what I saw appearing. I continued the reflexivity process as well. The initial coding phase is only a beginning to thematic analysis for identifying, analyzing, and reporting those themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Since this study involved inductive analysis, the codebook changed throughout the data analysis phase. Reflective analysis helped keep the data reporting grounded related to the research questions.

**Saturation**

Theoretical saturation occurs when no new themes can be identified, and themes generated continue to support already created themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Bowen, 2008). I gathered enough data when new pieces of information add little value or new information to the
emergent analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). This saturation component happened multiple times in my research. I had initial codes with my survey data. I reached saturation to move on to the focus groups. During the focus group analysis, using the constant comparative method, I reached another level of saturation. Finally, once my axial coding which involved reimagined and restricted initial codes, I was able to use feedback from the transcripts to justify the theoretical sampling or the process of informing some type of emergent theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Having additional input should encourage strong theoretical implications.

Table 6. Research Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1. Survey Distributed</th>
<th>April 2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determine emerging codes from survey response</td>
<td>April-May 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2. Focus group interviews conducted</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine emerging codes from focus group interviews</td>
<td>Summer 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare emerging codes between data</td>
<td>Summer 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3. Transcripts sent to participants for feedback and comments</td>
<td>August 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using all three parts of data collection begin to finalize themes and discussion of implications.</td>
<td>Fall 2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research includes bias from the researcher, changing interpretation of the data, and a responsibility to report the results based on the responses of participants without an intended outcome (Tracy, 2019; Yin, 2016). Trustworthiness is important and a main concern in qualitative research. When interpreting qualitative data and generating themes there is a concern of flexibility of the data and the interpretation of that data (Charmaz, 2006). This is a strength as well. I attempted to increase the credibility of my study, improve the transferability of the results, show dependability in my overview, and provide an opportunity for confirmability in future studies (Shenton, 2004). I used strategies that brought in multiple viewpoints, had members
reflect on transcripts to highlight any potential missed themes, as well as used structured methods to collect data, thematize, and review those themes.

**Triangulation**

Using the survey responses, focus group interview transcripts, the member reflections, and the corresponding notes provides an attempt at triangulation of data using the iterative analysis process alternating between emergent data from the readings of data as well as using existing models, explanations, and theories as a guide (Tracy, 2019). Triangulation attempts to improve validity from a variety of different approaches and sources of information.

Triangulation is best attempted through the use of multiple methods, multiple sources, multiple theories, and multiple investigators (Denzin, 2017). Another way of describing triangulation is crystallization (Tracy, 2019), where the research is conducted with multiple types of data collection, multiple points in time to create a multi-faceted picture of what is happening. The students engaged in a conversation with one another to find common agreement on clarity behaviors. Finally, this study was conducted by one individual but had the guidance of a committee of research experts to guide in understanding and interpreting the results.

Triangulation encourages multiple researchers but to ensure some element of triangulation, the research committee and advisor helped justify findings.

**Positionality**

Mason (2018) suggested that researchers must understand their understanding and the actions they play in the research process throughout the entire process and have it under the same scrutiny as the data itself. It is also imperative to understand the knowledge, perspective, experience with the subject matter prior to beginning research (Hertz, 1997). Prior to and during the process of this research I must take stock of my positionality and be reflective of what it
means for my process and my interpretation of the result. Through the process of self-reflexivity, a researcher takes careful consideration of past experiences, points of view, and roles that they have had. I have taught several courses as well as served as a student to courses in education and communication. The preferred method of clear teaching has been a subject matter and is something to consider and be aware of when working on this research.

I was a doctoral student studying communication education with a particular interest in instructional communication. I was also a lecturer at a university focusing on general education communication classes. Most of my interests involve finding strategies to become a better teacher. I am a white, male with experiences in education in mostly rural midwestern cultures with limited diversity. My first-hand learning and teaching experiences ascribe to preferred white teaching methods. The research I engage with, in relation to this topic, is conducted primarily by white scholars. Writing this statement helped me gauge, from a reflexivity point of view, that I am searching for clarification from an open-ended perspective from the students not my preconceived notions. Reflexivity plays a part in understanding the data provided through the process (Berger, 2015). What I knew at the beginning of the study changed continually through the process.

Throughout the course of this dissertation, I taught at three different Universities and had been exposed to various teaching and learning workshops and trainings to help guide my teaching. As a teacher, much of my time spent is finding pedagogical tools to help make the learning experience more profound. I also researched teacher clarity at various stages in my education with a strong disagreement with the rhetorical definition of teacher clarity by itself. The reason I continued this research is to help support the case of relational definitions of teacher clarity proposed by various scholars (Civikly, 1992; Eisenberg, 1984; Simonds, 1997). I must
disclose my education, occupation, teaching experience, and interests in teaching and learning research. My interest in teacher clarity comes from not only my experiences as a student but as a teacher. Trying to find answers to this has been a lifelong experience of mine. I have a bias to find answers to what learning is at that is the field in which I work in. I chose qualitative research because it best answers my research questions but also because of the fact that I prefer interpreting qualitative data. Rich narratives provide a better understanding of the various realities created. My background, education, experiences, and research knowledge guide the passion to find a more defined explanation of the true process of instructional clarity.

**Reflexivity**

Reliability, validity, and trustworthiness can all take different forms when justifying one’s work. In this study, the seven stages of validation are attempted (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). First, the thematization designs a research study based on initial theoretical underpinnings of teacher clarity research. Using iterative approach allowed for the comparison of what exists and what could be found through data analysis. Once again, it was important to define grounded theory was not the sole contributor to the interpretation of data rather an iterative approach was used. Secondly, through the interview schedule, I try to eliminate interview bias as I had open ended questions in a particular order using careful questions to encourage contributions of all participants. The analyzation and interpretation of the data is built on solid transcription through audio and written text to compare against notes as well as facilitator notes. With any analysis, research bias exists but was minimized as much as possible. Finally, reporting the information involves providing a direct response to the questions at hand. Most importantly, the two research questions and seven sub-research questions were broad in nature that allowed for a considerable amount of interpretation. Using constant comparison analysis and providing detailed descriptions
of the process helps justify the decisions made throughout the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Also, research bias and reactivity were acknowledged and accounted for memo taking, initial positionality, and constant self-reflexivity through the process.

**Limitations**

With any qualitative study there is the chance for researcher bias to determine codes and various other qualitative themes. I minimized this with three levels of data collection including a transcript review to help emphasize my themes and hopefully echo the same things I see. The size of the focus groups and amount of survey participants was robust for this study. However, the focus groups were not divided into particular types of students or highlighting the responses from particular demographic groups. A few things to note about the focus groups that might have affected the quality of the interviews. These focus groups were conducted during the end of the semester when students were already short on time and attention to conduct additional work. All three data collection tools were administered during the COVID-19 pandemic which may have affected the willingness to contribute additional time or effort to this project. The focus groups lasted around 40 minutes. This could be argued as a short average time for focus groups but may have been a strength in brevity and directness of the responses. Future studies should take the interview schedules and expand with more in depth focused follow up questions. This was a general qualitative study that in future implementations will need to focus on how to diversify the participants and document the responses from different backgrounds.

The member reflection stage of the study was an attempt to highlight new and overlooked themes. The limited number of participants and the brief responses did not yield the results I had planned for. It was a nice addition to the methodology and at times reinforced what I was saying.
but was short. For example, member reflections would say “it seems like relationships are important”. I added this in my findings, but it did not add a great deal new to the study. In future studies, it would be beneficial to “chunk” the transcripts to only include a focus group at a time rather than the entire catalog of focus groups.

One key element during debriefs with my committee included the interpretation of language used. Do students understand the language included in the transactional model of communication? Do students and teacher understand the goal of clarity in the same way? Future studies could easily define the language while priming the participants. They could also ask the same questions posed in this study with teachers to better understand the potential difference between teacher and student perceptions.

Chapter Summary

This study was an attempt to expand the notion of what constitutes a teacher clarity construct. Constructing reality through student experiences and perceptions provided a considerable amount of data to begin exploring how the transactional process affects how clarity is accomplished. The best methodology to accomplish this is to prime students’ thought process with survey questions, allow a chance for an explorative conversation with peers, and allow them to comment on the notes and themes generated by the researcher. Emerging themes and ideas are the foundational element of good qualitative research. Hopefully, the research and data collected provide initial explanations of a transactional communication theory to help explain the construct of teacher clarity. Those themes and implications are discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Introduction

The focus groups and survey data were all distributed, and responses collected in a one-month span. The data was then analyzed over a three-month period. The organization of this chapter includes each research question answered using the sub questions as a heading. In the case of themes that merge research questions together: those are outlined and described below.

Definition of Instructional Clarity

Research question one was the broadest question in the research study. The goal was an attempt to have participants describe and define teacher clarity. This resulted in a wide-ranging interpretation of what that meant. When asked this question, participants’ responses broke the response into three areas. They defined what clarity is, identified what affects clarity, and expanded the notion of responsibilities of those involved in clarity. Just as instructional communication researchers have struggled to define clarity and classify clarity as an elusive definition (Titsworth & Mazer, 2010), participants in this study didn’t really define clarity. Rather they explored various components of clarity in the second research question.

Overview Definition of Clarity

What clarity is, was most simply put as how students feel clarity is accomplished. They did not identify the specific behaviors of a teacher but more or less summed it up as to how they feel when clarity is completed and how teachers create an environment for all involved to seek out clarity. In the very first focus group, a participant said, “the definition of clarity is like communicating your idea as clearly as possible or most accurately as possible to the other person or the students”. This continues the expected conversation of how we perceive clarity in the literature discussed earlier in this study. One participant said, “I compare it to business, if you
can’t tangibly and fully explain your business idea in under 30 seconds there is a problem. And I think that is actually the case with teachers in their classes. If you can’t say at the beginning of your class, first day of the semester, this is what my class does, this is what we are going to do, and this is why you’re going to benefit from it in under 30 seconds, there will be a problem the rest of the semester.” This particular response repeated itself throughout each focus group. Each group talked about initial overviews and objectives needing to be clearly articulated ahead of time before anything else made any sense. However, on the flip side, another participant said that if students “cannot articulate the objective of the class, the assignment, the content, or the overall learning, clarity isn’t happening.” This sets up the foundation of the rest of this study. Teachers have a responsibility to set up the objectives of learning but there is no guarantee that clarity will be accomplished. This is the underlying argument of this research study supported by student responses throughout the study. Participants acknowledge teachers must do certain things but strongly suggest that there are a considerable number of other factors to consider. Such as one participant saying, “I define clarity as can I personally, myself reproduce some of these ideas I've been introduced to, if I'm presented with it again”. This is where the entirety of the study focuses on, the incorporation of how the student interacts and influences if clarity is accomplished. The definition is better explored throughout the research questions. It is important to note that all focus groups and a large portion of survey respondents talked about the relational aspect and interaction of teacher and student to reach clarity through a mutual process.

**What Affects Clarity**

Throughout the process of asking what teacher clarity is, it became evident that participants identified clarity that is reliant on students, reliant on the instructor, and repeating the differentiation of process versus content clarity as outlined in previous literature.
*Student Focused.* One of the most profound statements throughout the focus groups expressed concern over how clarity is different for each student and what they are seeking in the classroom. Throughout the responses, a theme emerged that clarity is reliant on a student’s ability, willingness, and enthusiasm to seek clarity. A participant stated, “there are two kinds of clarity, one as a student looking for a certain grade and student who is actually wanting to learn.” Others echoed this talking about how clarity is different for the goals of the students. Another participant talked about “students wanting a grade do not necessarily care about clarity of learning which could be a problem for instructors as they have the goal of teaching us not just giving us rules and instructions. I think this changes the game of what clarity is and how we get there.” These comments and common themes set up the variety of different clarity definitions expressed. However, another participant had a very profound statement: “you either understand the content or you don’t”. This was not as robust of a recurring theme, but many participants talked about how students have certain goals and objectives that override any ability of a teacher to accomplish clarity. Participants particularly in the focus group with the “understand or don’t” comment disagreed on the central tenet that teacher’s cannot do anything extra to help clarify content. Participants argued that the material is presented, and it is either understood or not. Other participants disagreed but pointed out that this mentality is why some students are either looking for a grade or to learn. Another focus group member echoed this idea by talking about how the “goal becomes passing the class and not actually learning”. Numerous groups talked about the role of teachers in accomplishing clarity but stressed certain student goals, motivations, and incentives in the learning process affect the teachers ability to be clear. One participant admitted that “goals of the class need to be clear and attainable by the student but if I want to accomplish them or think they align with my personal goals is a different story.” Focus group
members responded to this notion describing goals as “being important” but goals that were not in alignment could cause clarity problems. Another participant said, “my goal is to pass a class. I don’t think a teacher ever has that as a clear goal stated in their guiding documents. I would argue this will create a problem for when we attempt to accomplish clarity.” Regardless, of the focus group, the conversation centered around the focus of the student and how they influence clarity and goal accomplishment as outlined above.

**Teacher Focused.** Participants overwhelmingly emphasized the role teachers still play in accomplishing clarity. This type of clarity was summarized as how the teacher is procedure focused and learning focused. Participants talked about professors who were procedure focused regularly stressed instructions and “how THEY wanted things done”.

This would be the procedure of how assignments are done, how they are graded, how to submit assignments, dos and don’ts of the assignment, etc. The learning focused comments centered on professors who have clearly articulated goals and how those will be accomplished. Participants focused on how clear instructions are versus instructors trying to help learn content. This differentiation mirrors the distinction between process and content clarity. But the importance of this theme is that students’ ability to connect with instructors was dependent upon how they choose to emphasize the importance of the class. A participant summed this up by saying, “When the instructor, from the very beginning, is talking about the rules and regulations with no actual learning in sight, this is a problem for me. The teacher has created a clear expectation of the rules being more important than my learning. There is often very little chance for recovering from that.” The participants understood and emphasized what teachers do is important and will help lead to the success of clarity.
Process/Content Differentiation. This was an important reiteration of what we have seen in the literature over the last two decades. Students talked about clarity as two different paths: the process of what needs done and the clarity that helps understand content. A participant talked about what clarity looks like as “when it is obvious what a teacher wants. Course objectives are easily identifiable and addressed.” The term obvious came up numerous times. This was identifying both process and content. What a teacher wants was talked about several times about the rules and expectations. However, as mentioned earlier, the content must be guided with clear objectives. Lots of students explicitly differentiated when a teacher is clear on what an assignment is and what content is. This continued to justify the process/content differentiation outlined in the literature. Scales do not tap into the process aspect. They focus on the ability to deliver content. But the important point to note here is how the students talked about “the nature of assignment description as being rules and regulations that needed to be followed with no ability to deviate.” This is important as it informs a considerable amount of the rest of the findings. Describing clear processes and describing content are related, yet separate accomplishments. That is teachers who are clear with content also tend to be clear in processes (Simonds, 1997). The problem is that current clarity scales do not adequately address process clarity. Participants in the focus groups talked about “budgeting” time for class that was specific to content and process. They acknowledged that they needed time to focus on learning but also wanted time that was set aside to learn what and how things are done for credit in the course. A survey response said the clearest teacher “introduced the content, summarized, then introduced the assignment, summarize, and then opened the floor for questions. The instructor talked about questions specific to what was learned and then questions specific to what needs to be done”. A focus group member likes “differentiating between rules and learning. Otherwise, I am just lost
on what is happening.” It is important to note that studies demonstrated that teachers who are clear with content are also clear with processes and that these distinctions may not be different (Simonds, 1997). The problem is that the scales do not address this. This is something that needs to be addressed moving forward. Students will repeatedly talk about goals of passing the class and getting the grade. This mindset creates students that seek very direct and exact process instructions. They may not necessarily care about the content. I discuss this further in another section.

The three elements affecting clarity that emerged in the data analysis talk about student focused, teacher focused, and process/content focused clarity. Participants set the groundwork for understanding that clarity was not simply a teacher centric process. Participants began to emphasize here it was important to understand clarity is guided and defined by numerous factors.

**Relationship Centered**

Most significantly, participants talked about the relationship between individuals involved as “THE” defining characteristic of what clarity is and how it is accomplished. A participant articulated clarity as “being both on the students and the teacher because the teacher could put it in the simplest form and there is still going to be students who don’t get it. It’s all based on that connection between students and teachers.” The terms relationship, connection, and environment repeatedly came up throughout the responses. Even in the first question asking for the definition of teacher clarity, participants talked about those relationships in all responses and conversations in the focus groups. One participant stated, “creating a better relationship with an instructor and their students is crucial in the initial stages and then as the class goes on [the relationship] gets stronger, I guess like the connection between students and the professor gets stronger, that's when the clarity starts to get better”. Another participant followed up saying the
best advice they received was “to build relationships with instructors because they will know you better and you will know what they teach better because of it”. Continually, throughout the focus group interviews and survey responses students talked about the outcome of understanding being a determining factor if clarity is happening. They noted that clarity is accomplished by the teacher first establishing expectations and various other things but those were completely reliant on how the students interpreted, processed, and decoded those messages. Another participant talked about teacher clarity being the “changeable method from various teachers by which information is conveyed in a coherent and understandable manner to students based on their needs.” It is important to set the stage for those needs being different for a variety of reasons. Those relationships are created and maintained in a variety of ways. A participant summed up the struggle for instructors stating that, “an instructor can have a different relationship with an individual in their class than the relationship they have with the entire class and clarity will look different for those with different relationships.” This was then followed up by a participant with college teaching experience stating, “I had different relationships with different sections of the same course during the same semester. This changed how I felt clarity was being accomplished.” One of the few member reflections that reviewed the transcripts of the focus groups stated, “it appears that relationships are important”. This reinforced the theme I started to see with relationships and the value participants placed on those relationships. The behaviors which are categorized as building a relationship helped continue to exploration of clarity as a simultaneous process. We need to understand how relationships effect student perceptions of clarity in the classroom.
Elements in the Transactional Process

Research question two was broken down into seven specific research questions. The overarching research question focused on what elements affect the process of clarity. Using the transactional model as a guide the questions focused on people, message, channel, interference, feedback, context. Those sub research questions will be the heading of each section with the appropriate findings categorized within that section.

People

The first sub research question dealt with particular teaching behaviors identified by students. As outlined in the literature review, much of teacher clarity research focused on the rhetorical behaviors utilized by teachers. First, there is a table highlighting common terminology found in both the focus groups and survey responses. These are terms that were used a minimum of ten times. After the table are the common themes that emerged from data analysis.

Table 7. Teacher Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Passion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations Set</td>
<td>Build in Opportunities for Clarity (Questions, Reflections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus as a Resource</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt and Modify Based on Students</td>
<td>Multiple Modes of Delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Established Deadlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication is Consistent</td>
<td>Invested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals Set</td>
<td>Attitude for Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small words (no jargon)</td>
<td>No “Gotcha” Moments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidelines</td>
<td>Concise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relieves Tension of Students</td>
<td>Multiple Modes of Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Explain in Different Ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminders Provided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
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</table>
Ways of Delivering the Material/Willingness to be Flexible

Throughout the focus groups the conversation centered around the need for instructors to not settle on a particular mode of delivery. Many acknowledge the COVID-19 pandemic showing the weaknesses of instructors being able to pivot but they also talked about clarity not being one particular set of teaching behaviors and actions. They emphasized the need for ways of delivering material based on the students the instructor was currently interacting with. One participant said, “I had a teacher who tried to hit every element of the VARK model…. she was lecturing for auditory learners, writing everything on the board for the read/write learners, had us sit in circles for worksheets for kinesthetic leaners.” Now, the descriptions of what activity belonged to which group of the VARK model may not have been entirely consistent, but it showed the emphasis of how the participants perceived teachers had an obligation for clarity to be accomplished in a variety of ways but was entirely dependent on the makeup of the class and their learning preferences. Another participant echoed this comment talking about how it is a “big thing being able to explain things in a few different ways since so many students learn in different ways being able to modify from how you might understand it to how different students can understand it.” This self-reflective nature of the instructor is important to note as well. Throughout each focus group interview the participants talked about delivery method and stressed that it cannot stay stagnant.

Student preference of learning and understanding of the material before the class even begins is important in the explanation of clarity. One student said, “in many of my experiences I try to learn in my own way, but the teacher doesn’t allow that to happen, and they push their own methods, and I can feel myself trying to switch wavelengths between me and the teacher and it is
really uncomfortable feeling because you’re trying to think in a way that you don’t normally think.” Other students in that focus group and other focus groups echoed these sentiments talking about methods of instructor teaching sometimes doesn’t allow for learning in a variety of ways. Many acknowledge that it is difficult for an instructor to teach in a way that doesn’t make sense to how the instructor personally learns. One student said, “how can you help us with something you don’t know anything about?” This disconnect between teachers not knowing about how students prefer to learn and their teaching style. Another participant added “teachers have a responsibility to feel out where their students are in terms of being receptive to how we interact with them.” This entire theme generated by participants stressed an idea that the student’s preference and understanding would be a significant deciding factor on the success of clarity. The clarity process is complicated by the role that students play.

Finally, a student talked about their experience with ADHD and talked about “explanations or sensory input that show me what they want me to do helps demonstrate to me they want me to learn”. This began to stress the understanding of the teachers acknowledging learning barriers and trying to accommodate those students. Another student talked about “teachers who don’t have all the answers in how to deliver multiple ways but show a willingness to meet us where we are, helps me realize they want me to learn.” So, throughout the interview responses, it wasn’t that the teacher had to have all the skills and all the right answers but more of a willingness to adapt to the situation and the students in their class. Many of the students talked about multiple explanations being important and how that helps them learn and how it helps others learn. It is important to note that students generally focused on how the teacher was setting up an opportunity for everyone to learn not necessarily the actual act. This theme focused on the desire to have materials delivered in a variety of different ways and instructors to be
flexible based on the needs of the students. However, the focus group data never prescribed an exact way to handle this approach of multiple ways of delivering material. This theme will lead into a greater conversation about how relationships play a role in clarity accomplishment because of the interplay of the functions of transactional communication.

**Ambiguity**

This was an interesting development in the data. This expands the concept of content and process including different clarity concepts (Simonds, 1997). Ambiguity was either preferred or not preferred based on what the students were wanting understanding on, content or how to do something. Ambiguity in this data analysis refers to the directness or lack of directness from the teacher. Participants used terms such as “here is the answer” or “find that on your own”. This theme emerged as a significant conversation centered around how lack of direction helped with content clarity. The students had to find answers on their own creating a more impactful learning experience. Others wanted the lack of ambiguity in the process. Multiple participants saying, “what do I need to do exactly for the grade”. Ambiguity is desired for content to help them critically think. Ambiguity is not preferred for process so they can do exactly what the instructor is asking them to do. I explore this a bit more in detail below.

*Content.* Participants talked about the purpose or lack of purpose in certain behaviors used by the instructor. One student talked about clarity being best accomplished when a teacher “doesn’t say answers hoping the student will figure it out. This helps us find the answers on our own and begin to create a mechanism to better explore the content.” Clarity is going to happen quicker and more often with little guidance.” The participant did not use the term ambiguity but indicated that the lack of instruction or refusing to give the exact answer right away encourages students to seek clarity on their own or in different ways. Many participants talked about the
The need for “inductive”, “deductive”, “ambiguous” teaching strategies because of the role of critical thinking or access to resources as an important component of the class. However, in most of the focus groups students were a proponent of this ambiguous method to encourage clarity, there were just as many who had contrary opinions. Many students pushed back against the idea of ambiguity being helpful in the learning process. One participant talked about “having no examples, no rubrics, no instructions, nothing to follow, is kind of just leaving us on an island to figure it out on our own.” This theme of lack of direction to encourage learning is something notable. Another participant said, “critical thinking is required to truly understand something. Direct instruction and instructors holding our hands won’t allow that to happen.” However, it is important to note, this theme was centered around understanding of content.

**Process.** Others talked about the “need for clarity through the basic expectations of what a teacher needs to do such as instructions, communication, and grading procedures.” This echoes the literature that talks about preferred methods of providing instructions that lead to clarity initially (Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Hines, Cruickshank, & Kennedy, 1985; Cruickshank, Myers, & Moenjak, 1975; Titsworth & Mazer, 2010). It is important to note the early differentiation between process and content. Many of the participants wanted very clear and rigid teacher explanations when it came to process. Those who favored ambiguity were satisfied with this happening only in the content type of clarity encouraging them to seek answers and clarity on their own. This is important to note the interplay between what they defined as clarity and how certain teaching behaviors would be acceptable within process clarity but not content clarity. Another participant talked about “appreciating having guidelines for what I’m supposed to do and that they don’t necessarily have to be step by step but when I have a rubric or the rules I feel better about the direction of my work.” One final remark talked about
using the most simplistic terms possible stating, “I like clear and direct things that you have to spoon feed me”. But immediately, members of that group countered stating “broad, less specific directions allow for interpretation which then allows for more clarity.” Several students then agreed to that statement. This similar conversation emerged in all six focus groups asking for ambiguity to be used in the appropriate settings to allow for clarity to be sought by the students. Finally, one participant summed up the conversation in the final focus group stating, “the specifics are fine but that is in the context of what we should do, not what we should learn”. This differentiation of how direct and even simplistic instructions have mixed reactions from focus group members of what leads to clarity. This desire for ambiguity in certain circumstances and not in others provides an interesting future research agenda.

**Teacher accessibility**

Several focus groups completely moved passed the elements of what is happening in the classroom in their discussions. Throughout the literature much of the focus was on particular teaching actions that led to clarity such as repetition, concrete language, adequate instructions, step-by-step instructions, stressing difficult points and directions (Bush, Kennedy, & Cruickshank, 1977; Cruickshank, Myers, & Moenjak, 1975). Students talked about access to the instructor both in and outside of the classroom as being a determinant factor in clarity. A participant stated that “teachers must allow people to have access to ask a question by allowing times for the question and making students feel comfortable asking the question.” Others echoed this statement talking about “class time for questions”, “availability outside of class for questions”, and “creating an environment where questions are welcomed.”

Immediate question and answers between instructor and student weren’t the only way that students felt clarity would quickly be achieved. Another focus group participant stressed “if
the student feels like they can ask questions later on, outside of class, they have the security in knowing they won’t have a difficult time getting clarity.” This was common in each focus group with participants saying that students didn’t have to waste class time or burden other students with the question but were assured of a response because of how the teacher runs their class. Participants commented it “was critical for a teacher to create accessibility” and participants talked about how “accessibility varied based on the class size which was sometimes outside the control of the instructor.” If it was a discussion-based classroom, “we are already talking and asking questions, so it is natural to add this into the conversation.” The discussion-based classroom repeatedly came up as allowing for teacher accessibility. It did not “feel like a burden to be asking additional questions.” But in a lecture-based classroom, students might “feel hesitant to ask because everyone else seemed to get it.”

Another participant wanted to point out the acquisition of “community clarity” and said “if they wait to ask the questions after class, away from the other students they might be asking a question everyone else has anyway, fifty other students might miss out on the clarity of that question. So, teachers have the fine line to walk between making it “accessible for everyone to ask questions with others present to make sure everyone is on the same page rather than encouraging stand-alone questions.” Community clarity was best defined as “questions everyone has answered at the same time”. But multiple focus groups engaged in a conversation about how difficult it is for an instructor to create “accessibility for both in class questions and encouraging students who are shy to come ask questions.” Participants talked about the added burden of teachers having to always answer stand-alone questions. This notion of community clarity being sought out together rather than in separate instances is something to make note of. Teacher accessibility leads to the idea of community clarity. Teachers have the responsibility of creating
an environment where students feel comfortable to access the teacher and access knowledge. The notion of creating clarity through a sense of community will be discussed in a later section. This theme was specific to students wanting teachers to be accessible and create accessible learning environments.

**Message**

The second sub research question dealt with particular teaching behaviors identified by students. This had overlap with the first sub research question. The first focused more on the teacher themselves. This question allowed me to examine what happens within the message itself. However, this was much more specific to what instructors AND students did within the message. The previous research question asked about the person as a whole. As outlined in the literature review, much of teacher clarity research focused on the rhetorical behaviors utilized by teachers. Below are the common themes that emerge.

**Repetition**

Repetition could signal both a best practice in clarity as well as signaling clarity is not happening. The first significant finding talked about students using repetition signaling lack of understanding. Participants stressed that lack of clarity is obvious when “students are asking the same question over and over again”. This is important to note that teacher’s may be saying the same thing over and over again and not satisfying the needs of the student questions. But this is important to note that students notice that clarity is not happening based on the actions of other students rather than the behavior of the teacher. Students find ways to “ask questions in multiple different ways to avoid insulting the professor’s inability to answer the question but students are aware that we are not getting it and trying to tease out the answer”. This shows the awareness
within the community that students are seeking answers, but the message sender (teacher) is not finding ways to create the appropriate message. So, the act of repetition can signal lack of clarity.

The main takeaway from repetition is when it is used appropriately it will generally lead to a clearer learning experience. A participant talked about “when things that the teacher is explaining start to sound redundant especially in an online class or hybrid class, repeating information like deadlines or expectations to your student in class multiple times is super helpful.” More specifically though, repetition where clarity is being accomplished can come in the form of multiple modes of communication as well. Every focus group talked about the syllabus and how it acted as a starting point for what should be happening in the classroom. But then sending emails about how this assignment fit in the course work and what it means added to the importance of the assignment or instruction. But many admitted that the syllabus is often abandoned a few weeks into the semester and expect direct answers and open communication from the professor. “It’s in the syllabus is not an appropriate response to our questions seeking clarity. We are looking for those answers and the syllabus is usually a place we have already looked. We appreciate the document and its information but would like to interact with you to repeat the importance of what is in that document” stressed a participant. All of these types of comments were plentiful in the focus group interviews. They wanted instructors to “repeat with purpose across modes of communication, documents, instructions, and various other classroom directives.” This is important to note as an interesting finding. Many instructors comment that if “students would read the syllabus, they would have the answers”. But what is emerging through these data is a sense that clarity situated in a transaction is influenced by so many factors. Students are aware of the syllabus and the potential answers however the most clearly written syllabus cannot communicate all the answers.
One participant summed up this desire for repetition as “using the term broken record seems cliché but that is what I need to be a successful learner. I need the teacher to say things multiple different ways and even the same way. But I need to repeat back this information and ask questions to confirm. Sometimes this creates frustration in fellow students and instructors. But a teacher willing to explore this with me is an instructor I want to learn from.” These comments were said several times in the focus group and survey responses. They talked about repetition being desired and acknowledged that the social community could be supportive of these questions as well as judgmental of the questions.

Stressed Importance of Message

An interesting note from the focus groups especially was the importance of the material being discussed. Students expressed wanting the instructors to stress when something is important and make it stand out. That is the message that they pay attention to. A participant eloquently stated, “many can relate this common theme to when teachers say, ‘this will be on the test’, that is exactly what we want done to make sure clarity is going to happen in the best way.” One individual talked about “when I feel the teacher is giving strong instruction, I actually write them down”. The timing of that message is important as well as a focus group participant said, “talking about an assignment immediately after it is brought up or assigned instead of just posting on a [learning management system] and having us figure it out.” Throughout the focus group and survey responses, there was an overwhelming emphasis that instructors must find ways to stress importance of material. Another participant said, “when the instructor stresses established and clear deadlines that are super important because I've had classes where I didn't know homework was even assigned until I got an email saying it was due.” Others talked about “due dates”, “stressed statement”, “emphasis”, and “brevity”. The concept of brevity was
explained as “when the brevity of the message indicates to the students that this is important. Do it”. Most of the responses focused on instructions and major assignments. However, they did not talk about how instructors differentiate content that is important to that which is not. This probably emphasizes the differentiation between content/process clarity.

**Enthusiasm**

Participants wanted the instructor to be excited about their message but also use strategies to keep their audience excited about it. Overall, a theme of enthusiasm emerged but more importantly broken down into different categories. First, they talked about messages that created student enthusiasm and then how instructors themselves were enthusiastic. Both emphasized this need to have the emotional element drive the ability for clarity to be accomplished in the classroom.

**Creating Student Enthusiasm.** This is an interesting theme that emerges in all of the focus groups that doesn’t necessarily talk about enthusiasm as an instructor but how they find ways to help the students be enthused by the material. Summed up nicely by one participant saying “it’s how do you enthuse the students? How do you make them believe what you are saying? It’s like a negotiation from the minute they walk in the door saying, hey, not only am I negotiating for you attention right now, but I’m negotiating with you about how the words coming out of my mouth are going to positively impact you and positively impact you so much to believe me and change your behavior in some way to be more invested in what I am saying.” Participants used an appropriate analogy several times talking about “unmuting yourself on Zoom.” Students don’t want to unmute themselves on Zoom, in the classroom, or in any type of classroom scenario because they are not enthused about the class or the material. “It is the responsibility for an instructor to get us enthused about what is happening in the class.” “I will
understand better when I am excited, because you are excited, and everyone else is excited.” This aspect of creating excitement helps lead to a desire to learn and probably increases the clarity process. Not all participants used that term but throughout the focus group coding it was apparent they were talking about a desire to have energy from the instructor that showed they loved the material, loved teaching, and truly cared about the students which then translated to student enthusiasm.

**Using Enthusiasm.** Simultaneously and not completely exclusive was the desire for instructors to use enthusiasm. I began to talk about it briefly in the creating student enthusiasm section, but they wanted to see that enthusiasm. Participants want their instructors to have the passion and energy for their topic. One participant said this might happen by default saying “the teachers who are clearer are the teachers in your department or major. They are invested. You are invested. You might be going into a graduate program or interning for them. You are both super excited about the content. General education instructors are mass-producing courses to students who they know might not be interested in the field. Simply put, similar interests play a role”. However, another student disagreed with the notion of general education being a problem saying that “teachers who were energetic and appeared invested in their students led to students being invested regardless of content”. The significance of all these comments is the fact that a standardized education with the preferred rhetorical teaching clarity behaviors do not matter if the student interests and the connection of the instructor is not present. I would assume that it is not the universal opinion that general education instructors are not interested and invested but it is important to note the conversation about how the student/teacher relationship as well as the content interest and perceived usefulness of the material helps accomplish clarity. It really boils down to how much the teacher is invested in the students and how much the students are
invested in the content. Another participant in the focus groups talked about how when “you are interested or passionate about something you try harder in it so if a student is very interested in the subject of their learning and the teacher is very passionate about the subject of their teaching then each person is going to try to get the most clarity that they can because you want to learn more, and the teacher actually wants to be a part of the students learning process.” Regardless of using or creating enthusiasm, this notion of energy, enthusiasm, and an indication of overwhelming joy for the material and what they want students to get out of the material was very important for participants talking about how clarity is accomplished.

**Strictness/Rigidity**

In several of the focus groups the conversation focused on the rigidness and strictness of the instructor. One student thought it was “interesting when I have teachers that are very strict and give me every single guideline then it becomes like too much of one thing and I can’t feel like that I can deviate and their attempts to be clear has then boxed me in as a student and learner.” Another participant discussed “teachers who would just expect that you understood what it was. There's an expectation and everything was rather rigid and there was simply no room for questions.” The same participant responded to a follow up saying “I was talking to my parents about my interactions with professors compared to when they were in college. And they had far less of a connection with their professors than I do because of how strict and rigid they were. So, I think that we're moving towards and believing that clarity is different for every single person.” This notion of strictness and rigidness is difficult to clearly define. Strictness was discussed as more of an inability to fluctuate from the rules and policies. Rigidness had a more personality type approach to it. However, throughout the conversations participants talked about “flexibility”, “ability to go back and make corrections”, and the instructor “willingness to bend
the rules”. Many of these cross over into teacher immediacy research. But it was significant enough in the data analysis to signify that students flag this strictness/rigidness as a determining factor of clarity.

Other students talked about how teachers who “playfully bully their students”, “give students shit”, or “have fun with everyone” allow a sense of comedy are perceived as more credible. One participant had a unique perspective as having teaching assistant experience saying:

when I walk into a completely new class, the first thing that I'm worried about is the tension from all the students, obviously, because we all don't know each other. We don't know the professor. So, there's just that tension in the room. And then when you get a teacher that's like that, that we joke around, I feel that tension goes from all the way up here and then just kind of it's gone because you get that idea of your teacher is a human and will joke around with their students.

Another group talked about the human nature jokes can create. They didn’t focus on humor or the act of being a good comedian. They centered it as a conversation about how “deviating from the script of what needs to be taught and showing us that you are human helps us understand everything else”. Participants really appreciated teachers who could loosen up and be a bit more laid back in the delivery of material as well as the structure of their class. Rigidness or strictness and the perceived presence of it had an influence on how participants describe clarity in the classroom.

Personality emerged as a prevalent theme as participants continually emphasized the importance of how the messages, language, and communication strategies would show how they could interact with an instructor and seek clarity. The message itself would show who they are and what their personality is. Personality was important to determine if anything else would matter in the clarity process. In every focus group and consistently throughout the survey responses participants talked about intimidation as a reason why they could not accomplish
clarity. First, the instructor seemed to be so much different than them, that it was difficult to ever connect. Second, they never wanted to ask questions because as one participant put it if “I’m too scared or if the teacher is too intimidating it doesn’t matter how clear they were because I would still get confused and I’m not going to approach them because of their intimidating personality.” A survey response acknowledged, “the best thing to do is ask the teacher questions but there is typically a lot of fear around that for students.” Over and over again it came down to messages that allow students to feel connected to the instructor and to minimize the intimidation created.

Another subset of this personality is how they choose messages that seem passive aggressive. Participants wanted to stress that they ask questions because the resources provided or the way the instructor presented it the first time did not lead to clarity. One participant talked about how professors will “say they have already talked about this in class and that in a passive aggressive way this is an inconvenience to them to have to answer the same question.” Students continually talked about how they understand the professor has lots of questions from students and classes to deal with but when students would take the time to reach out, in class or via email, those professors with a personality of always wanting to answer questions seemed to be the most clear and effective at helping them understand material. The message and language choice were very important in how clarity would be accomplished and how and inviting environment to seek clarity was created.

**Channel/Context**

The third and sixth sub research question dealt with particular channel and context identified by students. These two have been combined to discuss simultaneously because students in the focus group and survey group seemed to articulate that channel and context are very dependent on one another. The channel of the message doesn’t necessarily equate to clarity
without some type of context being established. Surprisingly, the environment question yielded few responses as to what best facilitated clarity by itself. However, these questions started to explain a concept of time and how it affects clarity. This combination of channel and context is discussed as one theme. Channel and context blended together as participants said that the medium of the message and the environment created by the instructor, students, and the general setting of a class is an everchanging formula as to what yields clarity. Many students talked about their understanding in the class depended on the subject and interest of the student as to what worked best for them. Those themes are described below.

**Locus of Control**

This theme focused on how instructors and students managed the content, communication, how they navigated the course, how they kept track of the course, and overall structure of the course. It is important to note, locus of control might not align directly with the scholarship as described. Specifically, within this data analysis it is about how individuals felt they had control over their education, or the instructor allowed that control to be handed over to the students. One participant led with “the pandemic has given us an interesting way to measure clarity as a student is how you handle an online course because a lot of that is self-directed learning you probably have to figure things out yourself. You have that internal locus of control and have to figure it out instead of relying on the teacher. Where can I get help? What can I read to get an answer? What can I do?” The control of learning and seeking clarity in what is happening in the class would be assumed to be in the hands of the teacher. But several students talked about clarity being something sought by students that diverged from what was presented by a teacher. They talked about face-to-face classes being a bit easier for the instructor to maintain the locus of control as they could read the reactions of the rooms and have real time
reactions. The online environment and especially asynchronous classes would transfer the control to the students. As one participant put it, “sometimes we are on our own, even though we know the instructor is there, and all the instructors can do is send us an email asking if we are still there”. This comical observation points to how the change in how the course is controlled and managed through time changes how clarity is accomplished.

The second locus of control is how instructors might be flexible with course policies or traditions of instruction. Clarity is sometimes embedded in the assignment itself without the instructor needing to say anything but build in policies to encourage students to seek out the clarity. One example that several focus groups discussed were test corrections. A participant stated that “you are scared enough when you get a test back and see a bunch of red on it and being able to have an opportunity to correct a mistake and find the clarity on your own and help to make it clear to ourselves and the instructor that we understand the concept.” They questioned the notion of test corrections not being allowed or counter to an environment that would allow clarity. This was surprisingly brought up during the questions focused on environmental factors in the majority of focus group interviews. The conversations circled around how teachers create the opportunity for students to WANT to seek clarity through assignment redoes and corrections. Students talk about how the relationship is often destroyed with the instructor when they refuse to be flexible with the purpose of an assignment. Focus group data suggested they want the locus of control to be handed over the student to correct mistakes, show that correction, and accomplish clarity in second round of the assignment.

Finally, tying back to the ambiguity portion discussed earlier, the participants wanted the locus of control to be students finding clarity rather being told what to do all the time. A participant member succinctly stated, “teachers who create an environment for students to seek
clarity rather than them simply giving clarity leads to more profound clarity”. This supports the notion that clarity is not a solely rhetorical concept reliant on the teacher. Students want the ability to navigate the complexity of learning and engaging in conversations about things they do not know. The rigid philosophy of what is talked about and how it is talked about seems to be counter to what individuals want to happen in the classroom.

Simply put a participant summed up this conversation by saying “clear teachers give up the responsibility of being a teacher. Sometimes students learn best from other students.” In short, this has nothing to do with the particular actions of the teacher but rather the teacher giving the responsibility to the students.

Environment

Students broke the environmental aspect into three types: size, centrality, and type of class. When they discussed environment, they had a large discussion on what this means and what type of environment would lead to clarity.

Size. First, they talked about the size of the class being a reason clarity can or cannot be accomplished. A participant said, “class size has a lot to do with it, if the professor just doesn’t have time to get everybody’s questions answered clearly, clarity won’t happen.” Another said, “I think a class that is small and one that encourages discussion allows for clarity”. Overwhelmingly small classes were preferred, and participants acknowledged “classes that are small enough where asking questions isn’t overly intimidating” allows for the best environment for teachers to interact and check for clarity.

Centrality. Second, a theme that emerged in how participants described environments that lead to clarity is the centrality of the messages being received. The students wanted everything to be in the same place rather than scattered across a learning management system, in
class, via emails, through recordings, etc. Probably one of the most profound comments summarized the blend of context and channel with a participant stating that “students respond best to teachers who are in one place and do their teaching. That is where we can dedicate our focus. Yes, there is information out there about delivering everything multiple ways but when I have to listen to what you say in class, then check your email, then check my student learning account, then check the assignments box, then check the syllabus, it just becomes too much. I want to access my instructor in one spot. That is why knowing my instructor and knowing how they will teach is so important. I always know where the information will come from.” This was not a one-off comment from one participant. This type of comment showed up in survey and focus group comments about “keeping it simple”, “keeping it consistent”, and “not changing the way information is delivered.” They wanted information in one central, consistent location. This centrality also helped with how students could play a role in accessing and accomplishing clarity. A focus group member said “It’s access. If I am right there in class, I’ll ask. But if I’m already at home or somewhere else I’ll try to investigate and answer the questions myself, because I know that an instructor may not get back with me within twenty-four hours. And then that’s time that I’ve been waiting to get my questions answered that I could have been working on something else.” Students want the access to information in one place, preferably face to face in a small setting. This is an interesting deviation from the conversation about the general definition of clarity. The participants talked about multiple ways of information being distributed. This was a nod to the needs of students being different. This is important to note that even the participants note that they want everything in a central location for their own personal clarity. They understand that others learn differently so it makes sense to have multiple modes of delivery. Then when we focus on the message, they want it simplified. These competing themes provide
an interesting divergence showing the complexity of how the clarity process works. As one participant appropriately stated, “the more people you try to accommodate with your messaging, the easier it is to become unclear.”

Type of Class. A final theme was more specific to how participants interpreted the questions. One participant said when asked about environments that lead to clarity they said “I thought of humanities versus STEM classes. There is no one right answer when you’re writing an essay or analyzing a text. So sometimes it can be unclear. Instructors in different types of classes have the burden of different things to consider when building an environment for clarity.” Another participant talked about “I’m always confused in my math classes but not my communication courses. I don’t know if it’s because of my interest, the teachers inability to teach, the content, or something else. But it is important to note the type of class drastically changes the ability to accomplish clarity.” The multiple themes and reactions scattered throughout the responses in focus group and survey responses shows the varying the environment changes the ability of an instructor and students to mutually reach clarity in the classroom.

Community

Clarity doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Participants stressed that clarity was not reliant on just the teacher. A participant stated that “clarity has nothing to do with teaching style or the teacher being clear by themselves. It has to do with fostering a classroom community or environment that helps students be viewed as a peer. You hear teachers say let me help you, let’s have a discussion, let’s learn, ask me questions.” Lots agreed throughout the focus groups using terms like community, environment of understanding, ability to ask for clarity, and things focused on how not only is it a one-on-one interaction with teacher and student but a much more
community-based interaction. However, there were several dissenting opinions on this aspect of community and how the term peer works in that community. A participant immediately responded to the term “peer” by saying, “the problem with acting as a peer is that students nowadays want the respect of being a peer without giving any effort into deserving that respect of saying this is my education. I look around at my fellow students in my business class because it is more interesting than what is being taught; it’s like looking at zombies and not because the professor is bad, its’ because students just don’t care. Students go in with the mentality that they have to be there and that it’s the professors job and they are entitled to an education. It doesn’t matter what the professor does.” Another student used similar terminology stated, “student behavior really makes an impact on the environment in the classroom because students look like zombies and don’t want to be there from the very beginning.” Regardless of the term used in the focus groups and how instructors build that relationship, the data from these participants and various other responses indicate the role instructor and student interactions play in creating a community of learning and thus a willingness to seek clarity.

**Face to Face vs. Online**

Without question, students talked about face-to-face classes versus online classes being a large difference in how clarity is accomplished. Many stated this could be for a variety of reasons due to COVID-19 shifts. However, there was no consensus on which was better, or which led to clarity. They talked about how they differed. One participant talked about how it is “easier to ask questions as they come up during class when you are in the same physical place.” Another echoed that face to face is the “best way for communication and instructions to be understood and worked out by both parties in the shortest amount of time because you can read the intentions, body language, and facial expression more easily.” Most of the focus was on the
opportunity to react to what was happening in real time. Regardless of live or asynchronous online classes students indicated it was difficult for teachers and students to gauge understanding. Instructors can provide awesome instruction in an online class or a face-to-face class, but it is more difficult to provide feedback and tell an instructor you still need help right away. One focus group articulated this idea of connection when a participant talked about how “face to face works better for clarity because it allows everyone to build connections to one another in the classroom. When everyone builds those connections, everyone becomes comfortable which then leads to everyone being able to share what they feel like they need to share, and it allows those who don’t understand to ask questions without the fear of being judged.” But nowhere in this conversation or other conversations like it did they talk about the teacher as a sole responsible party of this connection. It was the role of everyone in the room or in the class environment to seek out that connection. This is important to note in relation to the transactional process of clarity. Comments like how “face to face encourages clarity seeking because nonverbals afforded by in-person interaction allow for greater data collection by both parties in the interaction and the ability to react and adjust accordingly.”

However, participants were quick to point out that online instruction had the opportunity to have better clarity mechanisms in place from the initial sending of a message by an instructor. Online instruction usually has “everything laid out in front of you”, “more available resources without having to ask”, “multiple voices and authors already built into the course.” Participants wanted to emphasize that it wasn’t a better or worse comparison between online or face to face but how the opportunity for clarity is much different. It also relies on the community of the class in both spaces. It depends on the students motivation to seek out clarity and on the instructor’s ability to use the space most effectively. It depended on a lot of factors and important to note that
both the survey responses and focus group responses overwhelmingly indicated face to face as preferred but always placed an addendum that online instruction had the potential because of the access to resources but continually said it depended on the preference of the student. The mode of instruction discussed by the participants had nothing to do with the instructor for the success of clarity in a face-to-face vs online setting. One final comment at the end of one of the focus groups conversations about environment said, “face to face in general is the best though based on my definition online classes can also be successful as long as the teacher and students are communicating.” To summarize all these comments another, focus group member said, “it depends on the teacher AND the student not the setting.” Throughout the course of the data analysis, I was contemplating the familiarity of face-to-face courses as being the preference because it is what most students have experience with. The online only learning model is something that is new to most college students. However, through these conversation and interactions with participants, it was a focus on how communication is created regardless of the modality. It is important to note one outlier found in the survey responses, “I have not been in the classroom since the program started two years ago because of COVID.” This individual does not speak for everyone but points out that many of the anticipated environments have been drastically shifted and altered.

**Discussion Based**

Several students in the surveys and focus group began to parse out the different types of courses by how the material is delivered. Many noted that lecture-based classes put an incredible burden on the teacher to get everything right when they say it the first time. But then when clarity isn’t reached this is where the problem comes in. Students won’t be willing to ask questions because they feel that the material should have been understood immediately. They
began to talk about how discussion-based classrooms allow for the environment to be co-created and students have already been talking and asking questions so when questions about clarity emerge, it isn’t a foreign thing to do. Finding a nice balance between lecture and discussion based was preferred by most participants. A survey response said that “the personal connection has already been established making it easier and more comfortable to ask questions in a discussion-based classroom, but this can be created in other environments as well as long as questions have been clearly encouraged.” Another focus group participant said “I am more comfortable reaching out to a professor if the classroom seems to have a general discussion component built in. During a lecture class I am more likely to reach out to a fellow student to see if they understood it.” Within a discussion-based classroom “not only is the teacher being more direct with us, but students also have the capacity to immediately respond. Other classes always feel like there is never a place and time to interrupt with a question to seek clarity.” It really had to do with the interactive nature of a discussion based classroom with a participant emphasizing, “clarity works best in discussion based classes because all of my peers are speaking along with the teacher. We're bouncing off of each other on ideas, reminding each other about things that need to be done.” Along with the focus group responses, the survey responses overwhelmingly listed discussion-based classrooms as a place for clarity. Simply put, it had to do with the relationship to the instructor and the opportunity for students to be a part of the clarity process.

Asynchronous vs Synchronous

Overwhelmingly participants said synchronous classes accomplished clarity because of the time factor and the element of being aware and having to be ready to respond. One participant said, “once we add these asynchronous things, as time goes along, what I thought I was asking may have deteriorated in my mind or things like that so we struggle to accomplish
clarity.” This aspect of deterioration of a message is important to note. The instructor can set up an important message but because of the asynchronous nature of the class the clarity can deteriorate. That pressure to respond will be discussed in the section that follows about social pressures. But other participants talked about asynchronous class being the best because instructors are “most prepared because they have to be. Due dates are clear, lots of resources are included, additional videos are included, and they give me feedback”. However, in the instances when participants talked about this delivery method others pushed back talking about “preparation regardless of the modality depends on relationships with instructors and willingness of students.” Another participant talked about “instructors can be unprepared in every type of class”. But the key component in every focus group was the aspect of being in the room and holding the students and instructors accountable. In synchronous learning “instructors cannot hide behind a [learning management system] or email, they have to answer your questions on the spot.” The factor of time which began to emerge as a very importantly theme in how clarity is influenced is talked about in the section of uncategorized themes.

Social Pressures

The theme of social pressure is fascinating as it will show up as both a positive to clarity and an interference in a later section. Students talked about the social desire to be present in the moment when in a face-to-face class. One participant talked about “everyone’s responsibility when physically in the classroom and how the social expectation of paying attention. You have to pay attention absorb more, take notes, and engage because everyone is kind of watching you. When online everyone is just a little cartoon on a screen and are not real people.” Another group talked about how “students have the responsibility of fostering an environment of clarity. There are always a few students that want to have an engaging classroom. Hopefully, they can spread
the enthusiasm and interest and desire to seek more information.” A survey response stated, “I am willing to ask questions but panic when things are unclear and wait for a brave person to ask a question. But usually, I am surrounded by those who are not that interested in asking question. So, I’m stuck.” This social pressure changes when you have an online class. A participant said “the minute the class goes online there is a disconnect a lot of times with professor and students. And then when it becomes asynchronous, it’s even harder to reach out to professor. You never talk to them, never see them, never have this conversation unless we set up a meeting so half the time I lose sense of everything going on in the class.” But consistently students said the social pressures make them ask questions but also discourage them from asking questions. They feel they pay attention more in a face-to-face environment because of the awareness of being called on and having to have the right answer. The pressure to look like they are paying attention to their peers and instructors is what is expected in a social situation. However, the pressures also discourage questions and sometimes have people thinking too much as one participant said, “sometimes I am so worried about getting called on that I wasn’t actually paying attention to the material and no clarity was met.” The question then becomes what role did the instructor play in creating that fear or was it simply the nature of how social interactions in groups work?

The intent of this particular question was to flesh out the differences of environmental contexts. This could be interpreted a considerable number of ways. Aside from the asynchronous disconnect, the overwhelming response from participants is that this didn’t matter. It was all about the relationship between students and teachers and the various other aspects of how members of the communication exchange go about finding clarity in a mutual process. This section of the study outlines how students described context and channel but see they begin to blend together as dependent constructs.
Interference

The fourth sub research question dealt how different elements might get in the way of clarity. Many of these themes overlap with previous discussions but particular things were discussed as a clear interference to clarity.

Social Barrier

The main interference is the social situation and barriers of a classroom setting. Participants talked about how the perceived personalities of fellow students and teachers might get in the way. A participant started this conversation by saying “I’m afraid that someone will think badly of me for asking a particular question, so I don’t ask it.” Another focus group member specifically talked about a teacher relationship saying, “when I think the teacher doesn’t like me or that I can’t go to the teacher, that makes me think it shuts down my ability to understand so I just accept that I am going to have to be confused.” Another student talked about how teachers should be unbiased, and most are not feeling that many of his “conservative beliefs are not appreciated or even understood by their instructor making it uncomfortable to talk and create a closer relationship.” Specifically, students talked about intimidation, fear of judgement by the instructor, and various other things related to social barriers stopping them from asking questions. The relationship of the teacher is the biggest interference identified throughout the responses. However, the teacher alone cannot overcome the pressures felt by a students’ peers.

The second iteration of social barriers are the judgement by fellow students. As discussed earlier students continually talked about not wanting to appear stupid or ask questions that have been asked or waste the time of their peers by asking something else. One participant said that the “social anxiety of talking in class is sometimes overwhelming. If no one else asked the question, then everyone else is fine with the material and will think I am dumb for saying
anything.” Another used the term “anxiety” as to why they felt that the education system is set up to “listen when you are assigned to listen and then figure it out on your own if you did not get it when the teacher first said it.” Now, most of the comments that led to this theme were not this profound or concerning but they almost all touched on this idea of barriers that were psychological. They were anxious, afraid to be judged or seen as wrong, or even afraid to keep class a minute longer than when the instructor let them out. Most conversations had nothing to do with the exact actions of the teacher but some type of psychological social barrier inhibiting students from being an active participant in the clarity process. Regardless, participants consistently talked about the notion of social barriers stopping them from asking questions. This idea of barriers getting in the way was best summed up by a survey response saying the “number one thing that gets in the way of clarity is my pride”. There was no elaboration to this comment as it was in the survey portion of the data collection but shows a commonality to other comments that there are internal barriers students face before even attempted to accomplish clarity.

**Student Distance**

This was a profound and well-articulated data discovery. Participants wanted to stress that students come in with a certain distance from the instructor and the material that influences their ability to learn and the instructors ability to teach effectively. This distance included the power differential of the instructor providing the grade. It also included how they feel the instructor is intimidating just because of the nature of being a content expert and the voice of authority in the classroom. In short, the instructor won’t have the closeness they feel with their friends, families, or even acquaintances because of the natural dynamic of what happens in the classroom. They talked about how students become distanced overtime as well as students who come into the learning environment already distanced. This affected clarity in different ways.
Becoming Distanced. A participant said, “at the start of the school year, everyone is trying their best and if the teacher is not meeting their needs you kind of see those people pull away and realize this class isn’t for them and they begin to hope to pass rather than want to learn”. The teacher’s role is emphasized consistently in the responses, but the comments made continually said the students reaction to this environment is the determining variable in clarity being accomplished. How students process and accomplish clarity will not be the same as the beginning of the relationship or class. Another focus group member commented that “when I realized I wasn’t getting help from the teacher, I began to try to learn on my own, looking online, other books, YouTube videos, a tutor and halfway through the class my goal was to pass the class and not seek clarity for learning.” Over and over again, participants admitted that they became distanced and uninterested in using the classroom or the instructor as a resource for understanding. They “showed up to make sure they got the participation points, but all the other learning was happening on their own in a distanced environment.” What caused the distancing of students included the teacher, the content, the environment, the delivery mode changing because of COVID-19, etc. But student acknowledged that it was the behaviors of the students, not the instructor, that resulted in lack of clarity.

Already Distanced. A participant talked about how “the problem is that it’s not about being clear or not, it’s not that easy for teachers. If you are clear and it’s not enough and your students are already bored going into your class and it doesn’t matter because they didn’t even give you a chance going in.” The responses started to focus on students were distanced from the instructor, the material, and their overall educational pursuits before the teachers even said their first word. Echoed by another participant “even in my favorite classes my attention is not there the entire time, so it doesn’t matter what the instructor does.” If the student is already
uninterested or distanced, the burden is greater for the instructor to be able to navigate their learning. In the next variation of student distance, participants talk about students being zombies. “People look like they're zombies and that's part of the reason why I'm dropping out is because with a lot of these classes, I feel like the life blood is getting sucked out of me because of my peers and that if I don't fight to stay awake, stay alive and stay motivated and stay alert, then I'm going to look like those zombies. And that's what I think a lot of people are doing right now, is they've given up that fight.” It is important to note here that several focus groups used this term to talk about how students came into classes like zombies with “no real intent to learn anything other than acquire a degree and move on to the next stage”. This zombie like approach shows the incredible obstacles instructors would face in accomplishing clarity with an already distanced student who has very little interest in their own educational outcomes.

System. The final theme was not specifically related to students being distanced but how they have been brought up in a system that encourages them to not be interested in their own education. A focus group participant said:

students gave up a long time ago even in high school realizing that their time is not valuable, their attention is not valuable, and they just have to sit in class. This goes back to the structure of the education system. The whole school structure of sitting in a class and listening to what the teacher says. It is not the best system to learn. It shows people that their time is not valuable, and they are just supposed to sit and listen and turn into zombies that turn into mindless employees who don’t know how to think. How can this ever lead to an environment of everyone wanting to accomplish clarity?

Another talked about how “I’ve never really felt that I was a deciding factor in my education experience, I just had to listen, do the work, get the degree, and move on.” Continually these conversations lead to admissions how students feel the system has done a disservice to true learning environments. They admitted that teachers often are not the reason behind this but sometimes they are. They felt that teachers had to work in a system that made it difficult to allow
students to feel connected to their learning and invested in creating the best learning outcomes. One final comment from the survey summed up many of these conversations by saying “how can a teacher and student focus on clarity when they are both exhausted by the system they work in.” Maybe bigger questions are at play than how two individuals work on clarity. Most of the conversations were generally positive critiquing the system itself not the teachers. However, one survey respondent stated the main barrier getting in the way of clarity is “the stupidity of teacher, lack of pedagogical training required for college professors and stuff they wouldn’t be able to get away with in K-12.” This was an outlier but still centered on this notion of instructors being part of a system that allows them to get away with poor teaching behaviors.

This notion of student distance had those who were already distanced, distanced because of the system, and become distanced because of some variable in the class. Regardless, this theme emerged through comments that focused on students not being entirely connected to everything else in the learning experience. Being “distanced” from the content, the teacher, the learning purpose, the outcomes of education, and a variety of other things continually were flagged by focus groups as a detriment to the ability to accomplish clarity.

**Feedback**

The fifth sub research question dealt with the role students play in accomplishing clarity. This was an attempt to highlight what behaviors students use and if they have influence on how clarity is accomplished. First, Table 8 highlights common terminology found in both focus groups and survey responses. These are terms that were used a minimum of ten times. After the table are the common themes that emerged.
**Student Behaviors**

Students summarized feedback as “being able to approach my teachers or being able to approach other students about the class work or a project or something.” Immediately the conversation revolved around the role students play in seeking clarity and that it was not simply a teacher/student interaction. Table 8 outlines the common keywords that emerged in the data analysis.

Table 8. Student Behaviors

| • Ask questions to instructor | • Research on own if environment doesn’t encourage questions |
| • Passion | • Give up |
| • Willingness to learn | • Give nonverbal feedback |
| • Ask classmates | • Google it |
| • Email after class | • Ask another instructor they have a relationship with |

A participant started the conversation in the very first focus group and these comments were echoed in every focus group after saying “you can’t just expect that everything will be clear immediately. Obviously, the professor has responsibility in that but there was going to be some critical thinking required in understanding what you’re supposed to do.” The groups talked about how students will have to go in expecting to need to ask questions as explore different things. Another said, “learning is not like going to the store where you pay ten bucks and get exactly what you need at the checkout and then leave, there is some work to be done.” This comment begins the conversation about how feedback plays a role in clarity.

**No Feedback**

One focus group started a conversation about what happens when clarity is not achieved immediately by the instructor. They discussed the strategies used by students through questions and reaching out to other students but then talked about how students “give up”. This was
identified as a way to get back at the teacher for not being as clear as they would like. This retaliatory nature of how students and teachers might interact poses a significant finding in how clarity strategies used by teachers could be executed but with no success because students have engaged in some type of retaliatory behavior. But more importantly the notion of giving up was because of lack of motivation. One participant talked about “students are kind of pessimistic, but just kind of give up in class, because they think they know the answer”. Another added, “they don't want to go to the teacher, they just kind of complain or they like you kind of see them just like give up, too, which is really disheartening.” Echoing this idea, a follow up commented talked about how “no feedback would make the instructor assume understanding is accomplished. This couldn’t be further from the truth. It’s because we just don’t care anymore.” This led into a similar conversation in the very next focus group with participants saying, “teachers ask if there are any questions, and everyone is quiet because they want to leave. At what point is clarity actually reached? Sometimes there are no questions because everything is legitimately made clear, and you can’t really tell if people are being quiet because they want out or clarity has been accomplished”. A survey response said, “I have questions all the time and just go YouTube it to see if it is explained the same or differently.” This can change throughout the course of a semester, with different students, different material, etc. Several focus groups talked about this obvious answer about asking questions to get clarity. However, they consistently talked about the role questions play and that it is not an easy thing for students to do. Each focus group discussed the role of silence and how it is common for students to sit in silence when they know they have questions or others have questions. But it was important to have this as a theme because of the lack of feedback in direct questions to the instructor lead to other practices in the
students clarity seeking. In the next research question, students talk about the reasons why they don’t ask questions.

**Feedback as a Community**

Students are afraid to ask questions on their own mainly because of the social pressures outlined above. The majority of participants in both the survey and focus groups talked about “fear of asking questions”, “being judged”, and “not wanting to be the idiot in the classroom”. It was an overwhelming emphasis that students were hesitant to ask questions for a variety of reasons. Yes, there were outliers who had strong personalities that said I’ll just ask as many questions as I have because I am that type of student. But the common theme was the need to ask questions or show they are not clear on something by a community effort. One participant said “one voice isn’t enough so two or more people who are confused or have questions will be enough to get the educators attention. But then when you had nine or ten of you it was too many. Having multiple voices but not too many to overwhelm the instructor helps in accomplishing clarity.” And consistently through responses to the questions participants started saying the “waited until they had a group of 5 or 6 to then send a group email with everyone cc’d to show the instructor it wasn’t just them.” Another talked about how they “wouldn’t go to office hours without a peer from the class.” This is an interesting concept to look at how one would need to seek clarity. Participants admitted they played a large role but would honestly admit they felt the need to do it with a group of folks for the best result. Whether that was fear of the instructor, fear of being judged by others, not being taking seriously as the only ones with questions. A participant said “we all have mindset of that kind of classroom environment is extremely important for students to be able to feel comfortable and like they're part of that learning community. But this is created more by students sometimes than the instructor.” Participants
admittedly know what role they play but it became reliant on others which leads into the next theme.

**Reliance on Others**

Overwhelmingly, in the focus group conversations and survey responses, group chats and conversations were listed as how people seek clarity. They would talk about group text message exchanges with multiple people in the class as where they would ask the first question. As a follow up in each focus group, I asked if the instructor was ever included on this exchange, and no one had an example of that happening. Because of technology many people search for information and clarity from someone or something other than the instructor. A survey response said, “I communicate with other classmates via a group chat to ask their understanding of a lesson or assignment and then ask to view their notes compared with my own to see if I missed something.” Another survey response that because of “intimidation by instructor they turn to peers and figure out what is unclear amongst themselves.” This creates the argument that clarity is frequently a group effort in a learning situation. Every group and nearly every survey response talked about how other members of the class were the first to receive questions on materials. What does this mean for instructors moving forward?

A second interesting admission is how participants rely on other individuals aside from the instructor. Participants talked about how other students teaching and talking about things help some learn as the quasi-teacher. The reliance on others has two sides to the learning process. Another student commented that “when professors first explain things, half the class is lost and then it’s kind of up you to figure it out on your own. But for me, I’ve usually been one of those people who has been able to explain it to other students. So, I’ve actually had the benefit of gaining and creating clarity because I’m teaching other people. And that has helped me learn
things by giving information again.” Whether intended or not, several groups talked about how the intention of study groups or casual conversations about what just happened in class is a way of best reaching understanding.

**Desire to Give Feedback**

Just as a teacher has particular personality traits that lead to clarity, students have certain personality traits that lead to clarity. They also have traits that inhibit clarity. One participant talked about how it “depends on the resilience of the student. Sometimes students have bad personal experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Trauma changes how school goes for them and has nothing to do with the teacher’s ability to be clear. The teacher is burdened with an extra barrier to connect with the student and make things clear.” The student then gives different types of feedback or no feedback at all. Other groups talked about the willingness to give feedback, ask questions, ask for help being determined by “previous experiences with education.” In the next section I talk about the interferences such as the school system and student distance. But specifically for this research question, students in the focus group kept talking about a desire to give feedback, a willingness to engage in the learning process, and ultimately what that looked like. One participant called back to the conversation earlier about students motivation to learn. “If they are there to get a degree and nothing else, why would they have any desire to ask any question?” The theme focused on a motivation or desire to seek clarity. This could be dependent on the enthusiasm the student has for the content, the relationship with the instructor, and various other elements. This particular theme was extremely dependent on all the other elements of transactional communication. If the teacher was not approachable the student would have no desire to provide feedback. If the environment didn’t provide a place where one felt comfortable to approach, students would not. Ultimately, every
variable discussed lead to this desire or lack of desire to interact in the learning process. This appropriately transitions the conversation to the last element identified in the transactional model, interference.

**Teacher/Student Relationship**

The seventh sub research question dealt with the perceived relationship teachers and students have. Participants emphasized a lot of different factors come into play from the overall approachability of the instructor, how the instructor allows interaction, the motivation of a student to interact. But consistently throughout the focus groups and survey responses, participants said regardless of the element of communication it was dependent on the relationship between teacher and student. How this relationship developed and was nurtured centered around the component of being comfortable with the instructor. The participants described a process of how the relationship with clear teachers develop. The notion of transactional communication was never talked about verbatim in the focus groups. However, the term “give and take” was used consistently throughout the focus groups and survey responses. Students realize that how the individuals in the class interact affect the success of clarity. One could argue that the “give and take” model is an appropriate second name for the transactional model of communication.

It first starts with the “attitude from the instructor being a driving force for me to want to pursue clarity” as one participant said. This comes in the form of the first day of class showing they want me to learn or not. Some talked about the rules being the first thing they talk about rather than the act of learning creating this divide and power differential. The first day creates a very lasting impression for the participants. As this grows throughout the first two weeks other things become more apparent. “Do I like this professor?” “Do I want to have conversations with
them outside of this class?” “Do other people seem to like this person?” So, a perception of the instructor begins to grow about how important the relationship is outside of the classroom. After the initial stage participants started to talk about what then affects the continued relationships. A survey response stressed that:

“teacher attitude often gets in the way. Those who see questioning as an attack on their ability to teach, or who have a fixed mindset and believe that students who don’t understand the material in the way they’ve explained aren’t able to understand it at all often stand in the way of clarity in the classroom. But more importantly students who don’t ask questions when they don’t understand and when they have a professor who does welcome question will block their own clarity.”

Participants then talked about how they interact with the instructor focusing on how “I often receive unconstructive feedback and being told all the things that I do wrong but not helping me grow. Why would I want or be able to seek understanding with someone who doesn’t want to help me?” Regardless of the focus group, the term attitude came up consistently talking about the attitude not only from the beginning of the classroom but how teachers respond to students. A participant talked about “tending to have a much better relationship with my teachers who are clear and welcome to questions and some of the worst professor interactions I had were because I ask questions and the feedback the instructor gave me was that the questions were unwelcome.” This continual interaction and how the students and teachers had to navigate the relationship was key. Clarity only comes when “I feel comfortable with them, if I feel engaged, and welcome to be a part of the learning process.” Another student referred back to the comments about the system being an interference saying “the system has conditioned me to have a particular relationship with my instructor. They have all the answers and when they said it the first time I shouldn’t question it. However, after seeing how college classes are a bit different once I started creating different, stronger relationships with my instructors, my education improved.” The idea that stronger relationships with more open communication and a less
rhetorical information dump model became the center piece of a lot of these conversations. No one said what was the best type of relationship or what they should look like. They talked about the elements being an understanding, flexible, encouraging, and overall easy to relate with instructor who would be easiest to seek clarity. Another key element is that it wasn’t about how the instructor first sent the message, it was about how they allowed for students to seek clarity.

The final element of relationship is the control the teacher allowed for students to be a part of the education creation process. One participant talked about how the “teachers who allow students to be able to construct some of the expectations provided more space for the learners to have clarity on what their own learning happens to be.” Of all the comments throughout the focus groups, this had the most resonance and seemed to appear in each of the focus group conversations. It wasn’t about the teacher by themselves but how they created the opportunity or the desire to participate in what expectations are. When participants looked back at the teachers that stood out, it had nothing to do with how the teacher taught the material and gave them the information. A participant said, “the relationship with my instructor is what makes me want to learn and dive deeper into the content. It has nothing to do with the words they use in their lecture. It is about how they show me they care about my learning. I will go visit them in their office, stop and talk to them around campus, and send them emails just to catch up. The relationship allowed my best learning.” The participants never really identified the perfect relationship but used key words such as comfortable, clear, understanding, welcoming, and enjoyable to be around. Maybe this aspect of clarity happening as a result of relationship and the various other components of transactional communication has something to be focused on in future research.
Time

An unexpected finding is the idea of time and how it affects clarity. This was not a specific research question asked and didn’t fit under one of the research questions specifically but needed to be discussed under its own heading. Numerous participants commented on the difference between in person and online classes. But it wasn’t the medium that they specifically expressed their noticeable differences in. They talked about the ability for questions or confusions to be addressed in a timely manner. One survey response talked about how they could “send an email and not receive a response in a face-to-face class as well as an asynchronous online class and the time elapsed from question to answer had a large influence on their ability to understand what was being clarified.” This passing of time changes the ability for clarity to be successfully accomplished. This finding could be categorized as feedback as well. But more importantly this theme fell under how teachers and students could navigate the time and feedback because of their relationship.

Time is a construct that has several interpretations. Time of the semester. Time from the initial instruction. Time from the request for clarity. Time of the semester focused on as one student put it “by the time I get around to doing the assignment I forgot that I don’t have to do particular things because the instructor had changed the instructions from what was stated in the syllabus.” Respect of time is another element that deserves some focus. Teachers that emphasize they understand the importance of the things you do outside their class but also be responsible to quickly respond to questions. No group articulated what a responsible amount of time is. One participant stated that “It is evident in face-to-face classes if I raise my hand and ask a question that the instructor answer the question. However, this concept becomes a bit more complicated through email, discussion board questions, and assignment feedback.”
Another survey participant said, “that’s what I miss about in person learning because I have to work through a PowerPoint and then send an email and make sure my thoughts are translated correctly and then wait eight hours before I get a reply and makes it hard to remember exactly what my thoughts are.” This doesn’t equate to a particular behavior a teacher is engaged in but the nature of both the environment and the inability to get quick time sensitive responses to things that students do not understand.

A focus group participant stated, “I always appreciate timely feedback from an educator or from teachers in the form of formative assessment and just being able to know where I am within the classroom, how I’m doing in regard to the expectations for the learning. And having those assessment and being able to reflect on those and then being able to reflect on my timely feedback is important for learners.” At the end of each focus group, I showed the participants the transactional model of communication explaining to them how I am using the elements of the model to explore clarity. I asked, it they would add or subtract anything from the model to help explain how clarity might be explained. Five out of six focus groups added only one thing, time. They said that how time is utilized and how it affects questions, answers, communication, and the overall exchange of information. This was a significant finding as not only did themes emerge in the conversations, but the groups also themselves added a theme to a very simplified model with no prompts or guidance. This concept of time needs further consideration.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 explored answers to two research questions. The first asked for a broad definition and description of teacher clarity. Participants summarized teacher clarity into three particular focuses including the definition of clarity in their own words, what variables affect clarity, and that clarity is relationship centered. The second research questions had a more
specific focus on the elements of transactional communication that overlap and affect the clarity process. Participants broke down a variety of different things to consider from community aspect of instructional clarity, how teachers/students are both responsible for the accomplishment of clarity, as well as how clarity is best accomplished through the creation of an understanding environment. I discuss and theorize about these findings in chapter five.
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

In chapter four, I discussed a wide range of key findings. However, I summarize those into six ways we should rethink clarity research and language moving forward. Those include:

1. Clarity should be defined and explored in future studies as instructional clarity
2. Clarity is a transactional process without a rhetorical/relational dichotomy
3. Clarity is inhibited mostly by student and social barriers rather than teacher barriers
4. Clarity is a community-based accomplishment with many individuals helping simultaneously
5. Students share in the responsibility of clarity
6. Relationships are a guiding principle in the accomplishment of clarity

There were a considerable number of worthwhile findings in this study. This is the most simplistic breakdown of what resonated most with me. The transactional process was about speakers and listeners simultaneously encoding and decoding information (Berlo, 1960). In terms of education there is no guarantee a teacher can teach knowledge to others or even create an environment to facilitate learning. The initial exploration of instructional clarity was an attempt to categorize teaching behaviors that helps with these components. However, there was still no consensus on an operational definition of teacher clarity (Linvill & Cranmer, 2017; Titsworth, et al., 2015). The difference between knowing and teaching is communication in the classroom with a knowledgeable teacher and a learning student (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978). Viewing clarity as just a knowledgeable teacher is a bit short sighted. This short sightedness is how previous research has treated clarity. What about everything else involved in that communication process? I think these four takeaways emphasize how the simultaneous process works.
This research has been five years in the making. It involved an initial question of “why is teacher clarity viewed as rhetorical when all of communication is a transactional process?” Then throughout the focus group interviews, the survey responses, and the feedback from transcript readers, it became evident, they all agreed that clarity is not a rhetorical construct. There are particular rhetorical mechanisms built into the communication exchange, but something is always happening simultaneously to potentially get in the way of clarity. Participants talked about the focus of a learning environment. Their purpose and intent are to learn. The teachers purpose and intent are to help facilitate learning. However, the multiple factors that can help and hinder this process cannot be pinpointed to just teaching behaviors that help clarity be accomplished. The participants summarized clarity as the mutual process of accomplishing understanding. It is time to look at clarity from a transactional lens understanding the sole responsibility of instructional clarity is not up to just the teacher.

This study investigated how clarity involves a variety of different elements affecting the learning process. Clearly, certain teaching behaviors help accomplish clarity have stayed the same in certain aspects such as repeating material, leaving instructional time for questions, providing detailed instructions and various other modes (Bolkan, 2017a; Cruickshank, 1985; Linvill & Cranmer, 2017; Rosenshine & Furst, 1971; Titsworth & Mazer, 2010). Clarity is also an instructional process influenced by outside factors, different individuals, and a complex array of variables. The data analyzed in this study shows students interpret the idea of clarity as a mutual exchange of communication strategies that then lead to an understanding of some type of learning related item. Findings suggest that students believe teachers do not act alone in some type of rhetorical delivery of a message rather a transactional exchange between multiple individuals. Teacher clarity is more of an instructional clarity process and construct. I argue this
is strongly supported that students perceive clarity as a relational instructional exchange. Teacher clarity suggests that the process is simply what teachers do and does not include the various other elements the influence the understanding of learning.

Often, the prompts for questions in teacher clarity research asked about teacher-centric ideas (Bolkan, 2017a; Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998; Cruickshank et al., 1975; Powell & Harville, 1990; Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997). Many of these scales had pre-determined teaching behaviors. But I argue that those fell short of asking of the interplay of what happens in the classroom but simply asked, “what does a teacher need to do to be clear”? I agree this is an important component of teacher clarity, but the student data in this study emphasize the various elements that have nothing to do with the teachers themselves. The teacher can understand these influences and attempt to adapt how, what, and the way they teach. The transactional component is complicated because it is not one receiver and one sender. It is a constant process. Some of the examples in the study responses stated that students give up when clarity isn’t accomplished immediately. Students are not motivated when they come in and openly admit clarity will most likely never happen and they are attempting to simply pass the class. Students look around at other student’s confusion and wait for them to ask questions. All of this feeds into the notion that clarity is a transactional process because of the constant give and take between what clarity is and how it is accomplished within a community of individuals giving and receiving messages and feedback. This supports the notion of motivation being a determining factor of cognitive learning (Comadena et al., 2007; Zheng, 2021). Motivation is a driving force in the ability to learn. However, in this study, data suggested it simply isn’t the role of teachers to motivate students, but students had a role in attempted to find motivation. Previous literature talked about teacher clarity and immediacy leading to motivation and enthusiasm for students thus having a
positive influence on learning (Bolkan, 2017a; McCroskey, Richmond, Bennett, 2006; Titsworth et al., 2015). The findings supported this idea but adds in the transactional nature of immediacy, motivation, clarity, and the overall interaction of teachers and students. The findings here suggested students openly admit that motivation will most likely not be affected by clarity and enthusiasm from the instructor. There are times where the instructor is not going to be able to generate motivation. The interference caused my lack of motivation and lack of interest in learning deserves a greater deal of research.

The overwhelming word used through all of the research question responses is how the relationship in the classroom creates clarity. Students who can be honest and open with their instructor feel they accomplish clarity. Students who find instructors willing to engage in what could be annoying behavior such as having questions asked continually to feel they accomplish clarity. Students who feel the instructor made an effort to articulate the comfort level feel they accomplish clarity. The transactional model lists six elements of communication and I argue relationship with the communicators supersedes all of the elements. The relationship is, however, created and modified by the people, interference, environment, feedback, message, and context. But this research study is a starting point in talking about that transactional model affects clarity. The key takeaways from the findings above are outlined below with how clarity is defined, how it is a transactional process, how teacher clarity should be redefined as instructional clarity, and what this means for teachers and students moving forward. The transactional communication model is nothing new in communication research. Teacher clarity as a construct is well known as well. However, my study situates instructional clarity as a construct affected by multiple transactional communication model components simultaneously. Opposed to how I divided rhetorical and relational as dichotomous constructs, I argue, and the data analysis supported a
transformation of instructional clarity as a transactional process. Students share in the responsibility of clarity (Simonds, 1997). The data supported this notion. Multiple studies called for examination of the construct asked for a notion of a relational view (Eisenberg, 1984; Kendrick & Darling, 1990). This study supported the understanding that relational perspectives are incorporated in a transactional process of how instructional clarity operates.

**Clarity as a Transactional Process**

**Not Clearly Defined**

Student data analyzed in the study focused on the abstract nature of clarity. My analysis focused on the community created and what that looks like. The participants discussed the role they play in helping instructors accomplish clarity. It is important to note that it was not a list of preferred behaviors alone but an acknowledgement of all the particular variables that aid in the creation of an environment that allows for clarity. The analysis summarizes how it didn’t matter what behaviors teachers use if students come into the class with no motivation to learn, clarity simply would not happen. This amplifies the continued research of how motivation and goals play a role in learning (Bolkan et al., 2016; Loes & Pascarella, 2015; Myers, Baker, Barone, Kromka, & Pitts, 2018). Data suggested students had certain motivations to learn that varied from class to class and student to student. My analysis indicated that the vast majority of conversations started with “you don’t know what it is until it happens”. It isn’t the teacher but the stimulation of some type of understanding that then accomplishes understanding (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001).

Participants explored how they couldn’t exactly pinpoint how to define clarity but could explain when they felt it happened and when it didn’t. They understood the role of each member in the classroom but feel that the term teacher clarity was a bit too simplistic. They focused on
the product of learning being a determining factor in clarity. One participant talked about how clarity is “if I can reproduce some of these ideas I’ve been introduced to if I’m presented with it again, if I can’t do that then I haven’t quite grasped the foundational skills I feel to be for something to be considered clear.” Clarity is abstract in the fact that it happens but too many variables influence the outcome of learning. Ambiguity emerged as an important theme in the data analysis. This contributes to the idea students prefer ambiguity with certain messages within the classroom. A recent study emphasized students are more critical of messages when ambiguity is present (Bratslavsky, Wright, Kritselis, & Luftig, 2019). Students stressed they want information delivered multiple ways but with a strategic communication plan. They want ambiguity in content but strict well detailed instructions for assignments. The participants emphasized ambiguity is a large determining factor of successful clarity. My analysis highlighted participants talking about how they feel clarity is accomplished when they better understand something but continually talked about how it depends on certain variables, relationships, environments, and other components. This justifies the idea of clarity being a transactional process with simultaneous interaction of different communication components.

**Role of Multiple Individuals**

The major finding of this study is the interplay between multiple individuals in the communication exchange. The idea that multiple people play a role in communication understanding continues to expand the concept of relationships being developed not only between teacher and student (Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006; Darling, 1989; Kendrick, 1987; Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Myers, 2008; Simonds, 1997) but everyone involved in the learning exchange simultaneously. Participants talked about how they might wait for someone else to ask a question or would be fearful of asking a question because of judgement. Even those sitting in
silence can change the outcome of clarity in the classroom. Emergent themes highlighted the role that a student plays in helping accomplish clarity. Throughout chapter four, I talked about community, social pressures, feedback as a community, interaction with others, enthusiasm from multiple parties, and personalities involved. This was just a small list of things mentioned. Continually students emphasized that clarity is a “group dynamic that is not dictated by one individual.” Clarity is a “negotiation with everyone in the classroom to accomplish learning with purpose.” Seldomly did the conversation center around one particular person giving directions without the potential for others to influence this.

My entire experience during the research which included listening to the focus groups, reading the survey responses, as well as seeing the comments from the transcript readers showed that clarity is only accomplished with multiple individuals involved in the process (Simonds, 1997). One of the coined terms, “community clarity”, shows the process of when to ask questions. Not only do student and teachers share in the responsibility but other students share with fellow students. This network of community is a key element to understand how clarity is a shared, simultaneous process. Participants admit that clarity can only be accomplished individual to individual, but it is reliant on how those involved give feedback, ask questions, and have their learning as a priority. This is a significant contribution to what we know about the relational/rhetorical divide described in the literature when discussing instructional clarity. “Although we compare and contrast the rhetorical and relational paradigms, it is neither appropriate nor practical to view these two traditions as polar opposites. These two perspectives imply reflect different emphases of the communication process” (Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006, p. 26). I argue this is in support of the transactional model of communication.
Barriers

The barriers didn’t solely focus on what teachers do that gets in the way of clarity or what they can do to overcome obstacles to clarity. The participants talked about all of these social pressures about what society expects of them, how they are judged when they ask questions, how the teacher will judge them, and what things go through their head to inhibit seeking clarity. Yes, many students talked about steps a teacher can take to create an environment to help accomplish clarity, but the participants emphasized that many of the barriers were outside the control of the teacher. These included the lack of motivation to be involved in one’s own learning, the fear of being judged for asking a question, the need to have a group of individuals to ask a question, etc. The barriers identified showed this incredible need to examine how communication elements override the ability to be a “clear” teacher. Barriers have been highlighted as noises and psychological interferences that obstruct understanding (DeVito, 1991; Ross, 1977; Duck & McMahon, 2009). These are all important to continue to study. The noises and interferences that would inhibit listening. But student data in this study focused on social barriers, community barriers, and the pressure of learning in an environment. Clarity cannot be viewed as disrupted only when a teacher did not do something like they were supposed to such as use a simpler terminology. Yes, this is preferred but a student might not be able to reach clarity regardless of the teacher behaviors. Barriers and interference should be a point of emphasis moving forward in how we study instructional clarity.

Community

Consistently throughout the research, themes emerged about community. Participants coined the term “community clarity”. This is important to note the expansion of how the field has examined clarifying tactics. Clarifying tactics included asking questions, nonverbal
responses like furrowing of their brow, or voicing concern of the complexity of the concept. Previously, it was understood when students performed tactics like ignoring the misunderstanding, asking for examples, asking for elaboration, asking for the instructor to rephrase, and indicating some type of nonverbal confusion such as a quizzical look directed at the instructor (Darling, 1989; Kendrick, 1987; Kendrick & Darling, 1990). But all of these examinations of students seeking clarity were about how they interacted individually with the instructor. No study built upon how students use other students and the community as a whole to seek clarity. Participants stressed that they wanted to ask questions that benefit the whole group of students not just themselves. Participants talked about the social pressure about asking questions that others might have or if they already had the answer and would be annoying for asking it. This community-based mindset shows a true transactional equation that seeking clarity is not just a transmission of a message that is then processed. It is a mindful navigation of a community of learners and instructors who have varying needs. This is something that needs greater research about how community and how students interpret community and its relation to clarity in the classroom is fascinating.

**Perceptual**

The main concern when starting this research was the notion of clarity being rhetorical and the sole responsibility of the teacher. The data support the idea that students perceive teacher behaviors and their own ability to want to learn differently. For example, studies talked about the difference between asking “are there any questions” and “what questions do you have” (Olson, Clough, 2004; Pena & Almaguer., 2007). This small change in how a question is worded helps build community, encourages questions, and shows a teachers interest to answer questions. Specifically, in this study I noted how multiple responses addressed questions being
“unwelcomed” or teachers being “unavailable”. The perception of these behaviors will vary based on a variety of different things but is grounded in the idea that instructional clarity is perceived through the lens of the student and their ability to accomplish understanding. Another area I explored was the perception of instruction and introduction to the course material. The data analysis generated a theme about how students placed a lot of emphasis on the personality and the initial interactions. Many talked about instructors being focused on the rules and not their learning. However, others wanted these rules established from the very beginning of class.

Perception has always been a key element of clarity research (Linvill & Cranmer, 2017; Loes & Pascarella, 2015; Loes, Salisbury, & Pascarella, 2015; Schrodt, Witt, Turman, Myers, Barton & Jernberg, 2009).

This study adds to the nature of what is being perceived such as the teachers initial conversations, the students perception of their motivation to learn, and the overall perception of what clarity could be and not just a set list of teaching behaviors. The previous research generated scales focused on teacher behaviors (Bolkan, 2017a; Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998; Powell & Harville, 1990; Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997) and does not allow the ability to tap into the fact of clarity being perceived by students.

Finally, one key element found in the data analysis was the focus on student behaviors. The first research question asked about the perceived definition of clarity. Participants discussed the notion of “student focused”. They specifically talked about how clarity is relational and cannot be measured in only teacher behaviors. If a student’s goal is to pass a class and has no other goal, then does not pass the class because of their behavior, how can scholars argue clarity did not happen? Clarity is influenced by the perception of clarity and what that actually means for a student. Future research can begin to address this intersection of teaching behaviors and the
perception element especially in newly created measurement scales. I am asking for scholars to begin designing and testing scales that better incorporate the complexity of transactional communication in clarity. Specifically, scales that begin to better outline, describe, and test the element of clarity in relation to process clarity. Incorporating statements that outline certain process behaviors and the potential desire for less ambiguity. As well as the desire for more ambiguity when it comes to content. Bolkan (2017a) created and tested the most recent iteration of the scale and admitted there is still great opportunity for revisiting the behaviors students refer to when they talk about clarity. The themes generated in my study provide a place to start.

**Stimulation**

Instructional clarity refers to the ability for instructors to stimulate the intended meaning of course content in the minds of students (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001). This study analyzed clarity through the perception of students. Participants identified numerous elements of clarity that is dependent on their interest and experience. Some of the themes were reliance on others, motivation, social barriers, and perceived social distance from the instructor. All of this effects the stimulation of the students minds. The late 1990’s and early 2000’s started a turning point in clarity research asking for scales to be more mindful of what is happening in clarity, how the field defined clarity, and how instructors and students go about accomplishing clarity. Educational research has focused on the idea of cognitive constructivism for a while where knowledge can only be built on existing knowledge structures (Powell & Kalina, 2009). It is dependent on the students ability to allow stimulation to happen and the knowledge base they have to build upon. This studied supported the notion of clarity not being rhetorical but transactional in the simultaneous communication and then subsequent successful stimulation.
Instructors can be aware of the abstract nature of how clarity is defined, the importance of community, and the barriers students might face. This is the first step in effective rhetorical clarity tactics that play a role in the overall transactional instructional clarity process. The entire premise of this study was to show how the transactional function of clarity in the classroom has a wide variety of influences. Time is the addition based on it being a unique theme in the data analysis, not subordinate to the other elements of the transactional model of communication. Recognizing the importance of time suggests revising our understanding of the model as static. Rather, it can shift dynamically to include various components which influence the success of instructional communication exchanges. Figure four provides a reminder of the transactional communication process with the added notion of time. I also break down the key elements found in each research question. The model is a reminder of how the six elements of the model guide instructional clarity processes.
Figure 4. Results of Study Using Transactional Model

| Teacher | • Multiple Ways of Delivery  
| Purposeful Ambiguity  
| Accessibility |
| Teacher Message | • Repetition  
| Importance of Message  
| Enthusiasm  
| Personality  
| Strictness |
| Student Feedback | • As a community  
| Reliance on Others  
| Willingness to Learn |
| Channel/Context | • Locus of Control  
| Environment Encouraging of Questions  
| Community  
| Face to Face  
| Discussion Based  
| Social Pressures |
| Interference | • Social Barrier  
| Student Distance |
| Time | • Time Between Response  
| Respect of Time  
| Timely Feedback |
| Student/Teacher Relationship | • Interested in Student Learning  
| Attitude of Instructor  
| Continually Positive Interaction |
Teacher Clarity/Instructional Clarity

Teacher clarity is a term that needs updated and examined more carefully in future research. Students do not believe teachers solely accomplish clarity. Data analysis suggest they have ownership in how clarity is accomplished. Instructional clarity should be the term used moving forward because teacher clarity indicates a responsibility of only the teacher. Instructional clarity emphasizes the transactional nature of how understanding is accomplished in a learning situation.

From the very first research question, participants talked about clarity being a mutual exchange with one end goal: accomplishing clarity through a variety of obstacles, goals, and processes. No group clearly articulated the shift of terminology, but I think it is important to note that teacher clarity needs a review of how we talk and think about it in research. Teacher clarity is instructional clarity. Yes, teachers will be doing certain things to help with the clarity process. But the results in this study suggest a variety of things that override teacher behaviors and their ability to successfully accomplishing clarity. Clarity is “making sure you have a complete understanding of what you are learning, what you are trying to accomplish out of the class and what you are hoping to use in your future from this class and how it will benefit you in the long run. It isn’t the teacher, it isn’t the student, it isn’t the classroom, it isn’t the content. It is everything that comes together that helps someone learn and use it in their future.” This quote in the final focus group summarized the focus of this research. We saw students talking continually about teacher clarity being only a part of the clarity process. Instructional clarity should be the terminology address clarity in a learning environment.
Applications for Instructors

It is important to note this research was not just an attempt to view clarity in a different way and change the field of communication’s perspective on rhetorical, relational, and transactional interpretations of clarity. It was also an attempt to find things for instructors and students to utilize in their future behaviors. The next two sections briefly identify some behaviors to help the clarity process moving forward.

*Be Flexible.* Participants talked about instructors who delivered material in multiple modalities but also talked about the danger of giving instruction in multiple places as it would be confusing. So, it isn’t as simple as putting out lots of different communications. It is being able to be flexible based on the needs of their students. This notion is not novel as we have studied this idea of flexible instruction even recently to help navigate crisis pedagogy and during uncertainty (Miller, Sellnow, & Strawser, 2021; Tatum & Frey, 2021). Flexible instruction is paramount to successful education environments.

*Understand Students.* Students are all different. Finding ways to distribute information is not as simple as just posting everything a variety of ways. Students actually discouraged this behavior. They want you to build relationships with them the best that the instructor can. Finding what motivates them, what helps them learn, and what they need from the instructor is a driving force in clarity. The connection of clarity and instructor caring had been studied (Comadena et al., 2007). The data analysis indicated multiple ways of delivering material, showing and creating enthusiasm in the material, and taking an interest in generating a meaningful relationship as preferred characteristics of instructional clarity. This current study built upon that notion but started to parse out the characteristics of clarity in relation to other elements of transactional communication.
Create Environments for Clarity. This may be as simple as the individual relationships. But students talked about how the attitude of the instructor, the perceived flexibility in how the class is run, how they emphasize that the instructor wants to be a part of the students learning, and various other elements lead to clarity. The environment is not as simple as the type of class, the modality of instruction, or how many students are involved. It is all of those things. Instructors must find ways to create that environment. The environment involves more than just the relationship between teacher and student but students. Rapport is a variable considered to have an influence on instructional goals through trust and prosocial bonds (Frisby & Martin, 2010). This study supports this creation of rapport but furthers the concept in terms of how the members of that transactional exchange participate in the accomplishment of understanding. Everyone has a certain responsibility in that simultaneous exchange.

Applications for Students

Clarity is just as much a responsibility of the learners as it is the instructor. The participants stressed the role they play in helping accomplish clarity. I think this is the most valuable finding from my study. Teachers do particular things that help facilitate clarity. However, students must overcome or be aware of certain things in the classroom before learning can even happen. Certain biases, motivations, or even the willingness to learn can have a great influence on the success of clarity and understanding. Students have a few responsibilities of their own moving forward.

Willingness to Learn. They cannot be Zombies. For some reason this term continued to come up from focus group to focus group. They admitted that if they didn’t have the motivation or willingness to learn, instructors were doomed. The student was doomed to get nothing from
the learning experience. There is a clear call to action that students must find ways to be truly engaged in what they are learning.

_Understand Instructors._ Just as it is important for the instructors to understand students, students have a role in understanding how instructors operate. They need to be willing to interact with the instructor. They need to understand how the environment, content, size of the class, and various other things influence the teacher behaviors. With any communication relationship, the relational creation of who everyone is in the exchange of information will drastically change the effect of the communication.

_Overcome Barriers._ Participants talked about how they were their own worst enemy when it came to accomplishing clarity. It wasn’t the ability of the teacher it was their lack of investment in their education, the distractions, the worry of social judgement, the lack of clear objectives of why they wanted to learn, and various other elements. What can students do to minimize those interferences moving forward? Several of the focus groups examined this and talked about how small mindset changes will help them and their instructor accomplish clarity.

**Contribution to Research**

_Expansion of Definition._ Rowan (2003) posited a simple question, “what needed to be added to the model of clear teaching”? My response is what I have outlined above. How do communities affect clarity in the classroom? How does time affect clarity? How does clarity as a transactional process influence future studies? All of the themes outlined in chapter four add to what was talked about in the initial studies which emphasized particular key behaviors such as repetition, clear language, and well-structured lectures (Cruickshank, Myers, & Moenjak, 1975, Hines, 1981; Powell & Harville, 1990). It takes the relational elements (Eisenberg, 1984;
Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Simonds, 1997) of clarity and focuses it as a communication process happening simultaneously.

**Content/Process.** This divide is nothing new. Simonds (1997) talked about content clarity and process clarity. This is something that is still evident. However, the student data analyzed suggest that clarity is accomplished and sought differently based on the motivation and goals of the student. The student wants clear instructions for the process if seeking a grade. Students are much more forgiving with content clarity because they are seeking understanding and bettering themselves. This goal/motivation (Zheng, 2021) derived by the student and how it changes content/process clarity is something that is interesting.

**Rhetorical/Relational.** For an extended period of time researchers have called for a better understanding of instructional clarity (Eisenberg, 1984; Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Simonds, 1997). The push was for a relational view. I think this was an important step. I think early research in the education field talked about how learning happens in a social environment with dynamic interactions among the individuals (Bandura, 1986). Others approach instructional communication research through a rhetorical/relational approach with teachers use rhetorical behaviors to promote effective teaching (Beebe & Mottet, 2009) but use relational behavior to create relationships (Myers, 2008).

**Transformed Definition.** The initial studies of teacher clarity proposed “additional investigations into the nature of teacher clarity”. (Bush, 1976; Kennedy, Cruickshank, Bush, & Myers, 1978). Hines (1981) asked for a “further investigation of clarity”. Simonds (1997) asked for an “expanded notion of clarity”. I am asking for a transformation of clarity understood as instructional clarity as a transactional communication process. This continuation of the research
does not abandon the rhetorical and relational components but merely examines them as a true communication process.

*Transactional Communication.* I don’t feel that my research is creating any new theory or innovative way of viewing a construct. I feel my research takes a commonly studied construct of instructional clarity and views it through the most appropriate lens of transactional communication. Separating the construct into a rhetorical component is a mistake. Take for example the leading handbook on discussing this and its title of the Handbook of Instructional Communication: Rhetorical and Relational Perspectives (Mottet, Richmond, McCroskey, 2006). The updated version which was supposed to include the chapter Dr. Simonds and I were invited to write that I talked about in my introduction, kept the name, and left teacher clarity as a rhetorical perspective (Houser & Hosek, 2017). Both, editions’ first chapter talk about the transactional model of communication and its influence on the field. However, they deviate from that expectation almost immediately. This study is a call to better classify, study, and understand the numerous elements affecting instructional clarity. It simply is not the teacher alone.

*Interplay of Instructional Constructs.* Researchers have continually identified the interplay between teacher immediacy, motivation, and clarity (Comadena et al., 2007). This research study expanded that notion by identifying students sometimes have little interest in their own academic work let alone what the instructor is doing. Themes suggested a strong interplay between how students perceive teacher and how they perceive their own ability to learn. Clarity is influenced by engagement, culture, prior knowledge, and the interactive nature of multiple instructional clarity constructs (Roksa, Trolian, Blaich, & Wise, 2016). Motivation to learn, relationship to the teacher, closeness to their peers are all key elements in this study in relation to
accomplishing clarity. Again, this is not a rhetorical mechanism that clarity is done and then walked away from after a sequence of preferred behaviors.

**Implications for Future Research**

These findings suggest a need for other quantitative and qualitative studies to examine new questions generated by this study. Those questions include:

1. How do we continue to examine instructional clarity as a transactional process?
2. How do we build measurement scales to incorporate transactional functions?
3. What theories and other communication variables would be served by this expanded notion of instructional clarity?

I think it is important to first look at clarity scales and their focus on behaviors implemented by teachers. It is something to consider moving away from teacher clarity scales to scales that measure how clarity is accomplished. Maybe focusing on the student roles and behaviors in combination with the teacher. The key motivation behind the study was years of wondering why I couldn’t write a book chapter because of teacher clarity being a rhetorical construct. After years of study, years of research, and months of engaging with student responses to the questions, I generated, the students said it is not. It is transactional because of how they perceive clarity being accomplished as a product of learning with so many factors influencing a community of learners in various environments. Future studies need to build on these findings and begin asking questions that focus on how shifting from teacher clarity to instructional clarity changes how instructors can best serve their students. Studies should utilize goals theories to help see how students create goal when going into a learning situation. Studies should begin to modify the questions asked to be more learning environment centered than teacher centric. Regardless, the discussions and findings in this study provide “an expanded notion of teacher clarity” (Simonds,
1997). My research hunch was that clarity is much more than just teacher behaviors. I believe students argued that same viewpoint in their responses in this study. Let’s continue to expand this notion of clarity.
REFERENCES


doi:10.1080/19477503.2017.1375354


APPENDIX A: PRE-FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

I am 18 or older and willing to participate in this study

☐ Yes (1)
☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If I am 18 or older and willing to participate in this study = No

Please provide your email address to contact you for the gift card, if you are chosen in the random drawing at the conclusion of this research study.

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

What is your year of birth?

_______________________________________________________________________________
What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree (1)
- High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED) (2)
- Some college but no degree (3)
- Associate degree in college (2-year) (4)
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year) (5)
- Master's degree (6)
- Doctoral degree (7)
- Professional degree (JD, MD) (8)

Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- Other (6) ________________________________
What experiences do you have with college education? Select all that apply:

- [ ] Face to Face Lecture (1)
- [ ] Face to Face Discussion Based Class (2)
- [ ] Face to Face Lab (3)
- [ ] Online Course (4)
- [ ] Hybrid Course (5)
- [ ] Course taught by a teaching assistant (6)

How do you define teacher clarity? (RQ1)

How do you and your teacher accomplish clarity in the classroom? (RQ2.1 & 2.2)

Describe the interactions you have with a “clear” teacher. (RQ2.3)

What type of class do you feel clarity is most easily accomplished? Describe why. (RQ2.3)

Examples: Face to face, face to face discussion based, face to face lab, online course, hybrid course, course taught by a teaching assistant.

When something is unclear in the classroom, what do you do and what do others do to achieve clarity? (RQ2.5)

What barriers get in the way of clarity in the classroom? (RQ2.4)
APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Welcome, and thank you for participating in my study. I’m looking forward to learning about your experiences in the classroom. In front of you when you sat down was a document informing you of your consent to participate in this study. This study is voluntary, and you are free to leave at any time.

By signing that document, you gave your informed consent to participate in this study. By agreeing to participate in this study. There are no significant risks or direct benefits to being in the study. However, your participation will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding clarity in a classroom setting. I won’t be using your name in the transcript, but I will need to keep track of each person. I suggest that you have a pencil and paper ready in case you want to remember a thought or record someone else’s comment so that you can build off of it once they are done speaking, we will have time for an open discussion at the end of our focus group, when you can share any ideas that come up for you today. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Please introduce yourself to the group by sharing your first name, your major, and favorite class you have taken in college? [Interviewer will attempt to address everyone by name]

• What type of classes have you taken in a college setting?
  o Prompt-Face to face, face to face discussion based, face to face lab, online course, hybrid course, course taught by a teaching assistant.
  o Please describe different types of learning environments.

• How do you define accomplishing clarity in your learning? RQ1

• What particular things happen in a learning environment that led to clarity? RQ1

• Describe what happens in classrooms that you feel clarity is accomplished. RQ1
o Describe what happens in classrooms that you feel clarity is not accomplished.

RQ1

• What particular behaviors teachers use to be clear in the classroom. RQ2.2

• Describe the relationship you have with instructors who are most clear. RQ2.6
  o Describe the relationship you have with instructors who are least clear. RQ2.6

• Think back to the question I asked at the beginning about different learning environments. Which ones seemed to accomplish clarity the best? The least? Why?
  RQ2.3
  o Prompt: List the types of classes mentioned.
  o Prompt: Additional exploration may be needed to identify classes and different clarity issues within those classes.

• When something is unclear in the classroom, what do you do and what do others do to achieve clarity? RQ2.5

• What gets in the way of accomplishing clarity in the classroom? RQ2.4
  o Prompt-Internal/External noise examples

  o Any other thoughts you would like to share about clarity

  o Any comments from your notes that you would like to address or extend the conversation on?

  o Thank you all for your time. I appreciate your honesty in your responses. I will provide your gift card before you leave.

  o If you would like to participate in a reflection of the focus groups, please indicate before you leave so I can give you further instructions.
APPENDIX C: TRANSCRIPT FEEDBACK QUESTIONS

While reading through the transcripts and notes, please add comments and feedback about what you see as noteworthy or interesting in the participant comments:

How do the participants of these focus groups define teacher clarity? (RQ1)

How do they and their teacher accomplish clarity in the classroom? (RQ2.1 & 2.2)

Describe the interactions they have with a “clear” teacher. (RQ2.6 & RQ 2.7)

What type of class do they feel clarity is most easily accomplished? Describe why. (RQ2.3)

Examples: Face to face, face to face discussion based, face to face lab, online course, hybrid course, course taught by a teaching assistant.

When something is unclear in the classroom, what do these students do and what do others do to achieve clarity? (RQ2.5)

Based on the conversation in this focus group, what barriers get in the way of clarity in the classroom? (RQ2.4)
APPENDIX D: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IRB-2021-56 – Modification: Exempt Determination

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

To: Horn, Dakota; Croupler, Thomas

Re: Exempt - Modification - IRB-2021-56 TEACHER CLARITY EXAMINED AS A TRANSACTIONAL PROCESS

Dear Dr. Thomas Croupler:

Illinois State University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision that your study meets the criteria for an exempt determination and the submitted modification can now be implemented.

Your study qualified for: Category 2 (e) – Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including Visio or auditory recording). Any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

The Exempt Status does not relieve the investigator of any responsibilities relating to the research participants or university policy. Research should be conducted in accordance with the ethical principles; (i) Respect for Persons, (ii) Beneficence, and (iii) Justice, as outlined in the Belmont Report. Any other changes to the protocol or study materials that might affect the Exempt Status must be submitted in Cayuse Human Ethics. Depending on the changes, you may be required to apply for either Expedited or Full Review.

Please contact the Human Subjects Research Specialist to determine if your modifications meet these criteria at 309-438-5527 or ilsirb@ilstu.edu.

Additional Notes:
Please ensure that any COVID related guidelines provided by the university are followed. For the most up-to-date information and guidance regarding research and how it has been impacted by COVID-19, please review the following links:

- Redbirds Keep Researching: https://research.ilstu.edu/coronavirus/
- IRB Guidance: https://research.ilstu.edu/ethics/human/research/
Hello ISU Students,

We would like to invite you to participate in our campus-wide research study. The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of teacher clarity. The survey will take you approximately 10-15 minutes. Please click on the following link to view the informed consent and survey.

http://bradley.a1.qualtrics.com/ife/form/SV_8qJLovo78eKEQnpP

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Dakota Horn, Doctoral Candidate, School of Teaching and Learning

Dr. Thomas Crumpler, School of Teaching and Learning
APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP RECRUITMENT EMAIL

[ISUSTUDENTS-L] RESEARCH: Opportunity to participate in a focus group with compensation

To: Isustudents-l

From: Dakota Horn - Illinois State University <dhorn@ilstu.edu>

Thursday, April 8, 2021 at 8:38 AM

Hello ISU students,

We would like to invite you to participate in a research study to explore perceptions of teacher clarity.

Last week, an email was sent out with an opportunity for a survey. That was part one of this research study. Part two involves a focus group interview.

This involves participation in a 60-minute focus group interview with 4-5 other students. All participants will be provided a $50 gift card at the completion of the session.

Please use the link below to sign up for available focus group slots and further instructions:

https://www.crowdcal.com/apps/85DF4CAAA3E65F3-teacher

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Dakota Horn, School of Teaching and Learning

Dr. Thomas Cronin, School of Teaching and Learning
APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT-FOCUS GROUP

You agree to an in-person focus group conversation. The focus group will take no longer than 60 minutes.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Apart from your time, there are no additional costs to participate in this study. You must be age 18 or older to participate. This study is being conducted by Dakota C. Horn, a student in the Teaching and Learning doctorate program, at Illinois State University. This project is for the completion of his dissertation, under the direction of Dr. Thomas Crumpler.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, you can contact the co-principal investigator at dchorn@ilstu.edu or the principal investigator at tpcrump@ilstu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, please contact the Research Ethics & Compliance Office at Illinois State University, at rec@ilstu.edu and (309) 438-5527.

Why are you being asked?

You have been asked to participate because you are/were a college student. You are ineligible to participate if you are under the age of 18.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

What would you do?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide your opinion about various research scenarios in a group conversation with fellow students (60 minutes).

Are any risks expected?

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life.

Will your information be protected?
Your responses in the focus group will be anonymous; nothing that will identify you will be linked to your responses.

The findings from this study may be presented in conferences, meetings, and publications. When these findings are presented, your responses will be combined with the responses of other participants.

**Who will benefit from this study?**

While you may not directly benefit from this study, your responses will help inform best research practices and develop guidelines for ethical research.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact Dakota Horn at dchorn@ilstu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or IRB@ilstu.edu.
APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT-SURVEY

You agree to complete a short survey. The survey will take no longer than 15 minutes.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Apart from your time, there are no additional costs to participate in this study. You must be age 18 or older to participate. This study is being conducted by Dakota C. Horn, a student in the Teaching and Learning doctorate program, at Illinois State University. This project is for the completion of his dissertation, under the direction of Dr. Thomas Crumpler.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, you can contact the co-principal investigator at dchorn@ilstu.edu or the principal investigator at tpcrump@ilstu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, please contact the Research Ethics & Compliance Office at Illinois State University, at rec@ilstu.edu and (309) 438-5527.

Why are you being asked?

You have been asked to participate because you are/were a college student. You are ineligible to participate if you are under the age of 18.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

What would you do?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide your opinion classroom scenarios

Are any risks expected?

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life.

Will your information be protected?
Your responses in the survey will be anonymous; nothing that will identify you will be linked to your responses.

The findings from this study may be presented in conferences, meetings, and publications. When these findings are presented, your responses will be combined with the responses of other participants.

**Who will benefit from this study?**

While you may not directly benefit from this study, your responses will help inform best research practices and develop guidelines for ethical research.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact Dakota Horn at dchorn@ilstu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or IRB@ilstu.edu.
APPENDIX I: TRANSCRIPT COMMENTING INFORMED CONSENT

Part 3-Dissertation-Transcript Commenting Consent Included in Qualtrics Survey

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Dakota Horn under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Crumpler in the College of Education at Illinois State University. The purpose of this study is to examine how participants perceive teacher clarity.

Why are you being asked?
You have been asked to participate because you are/were a college student. You are ineligible to participate if you are under the age of 18. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will
not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

**What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide your opinion about various research scenarios in an online survey.

1. Read through the focus group transcripts provided
2. Answer questions that follow related to your takeaways from transcripts.

**Are any risks expected?**

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life.

**Will your information be protected?**

Your responses in the survey will be anonymous; nothing that will identify you will be linked to your responses. The findings from this study may be presented in conferences, meetings, and publications. When these findings are presented, your responses will be combined with the responses of other participants.

**Will you receive anything for participating?**

By completing the transcript commenting you will be sent a $10 gift card. The IRS may consider these payments to be taxable compensation. Recipients of a research participant incentive payment may want to consult with their personal tax advisor for advice regarding the participant’s situation. Any participant also has the opportunity to participate in the study without
accepting the research incentive payment. In order to receive the compensation, at the end of the survey you will be taken to a separate page to enter your contact information. This information will be kept entirely separate from the survey and your responses and will be securely stored by the researcher for audit purposes only.

**Who will benefit from this study?**

While you may not directly benefit from this study, your responses will help inform best research practices and develop guidelines for ethical research.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact Dakota Horn dchorn@ilstu.edu.———If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or IRB@ilstu.edu.

**Documentation of Consent**

Check the box below if you are willing to participate. If you do not want to participate, you can close the survey. You can print this form for your records.

Q1 I am 18 or older and willing to participate in this part of the study.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)