

ARE YOU CLEAR?

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How many explanations do you give your students every week? Although explanations are definitely one of the most common and central instructional strategies, we rarely take time to focus on or plan them. Below are seven tips to help you give clear explanations that promote learning.

SEVEN TIPS FOR CRAFTING BETTER EXPLANATIONS

1. USE LEARNER-APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE.

While this might seem self-evident, given the time we spend reading and speaking the language of our particular discipline, we sometimes forget to make it easy to understand for others. But what good is it to use jargon that leaves students in the dark? Without in the least “watering down” the content or compromising its intellectual integrity, we can still adapt our language for newcomers to the field.

2. RESPECT DIFFERENCES IN COMPREHENSION SPEED.

A lot of material to get through and not enough time, sounds familiar? But sometimes we have to slow down: our students are unfamiliar with the road, and we have to give them the time and space they need to master new knowledge. Some “get it” right off the bat; others need additional explanations presented in different ways. The more important and essential the concept, the more vital it is to explain it, so as to ensure that as many students as possible understand.

3. PROVIDE DIFFERENT KINDS OF EXPLANATIONS.

When preparing our explanations, we think we’re being clear: the way in which we present the information makes perfect sense to us. But why, in that case, do so many students fail to comprehend the concepts? Since we so often find ourselves in the position of having to improvise additional explanations, wouldn’t it be easier to plan alternative ways to explain key concepts from the get-go?

4. VARY YOUR SOURCES.

Sometimes understanding comes in a flash; sometimes, it grows bit by bit. If the ultimate goal is to have students grasp key concepts, the source of the explanations should not be an issue. While it is true that those given by the teacher will likely be the most complete and accurate, if the door to understanding is opened by someone or something else (a guest speaker, reading, or peer), the teacher can always fill in what’s missing or add details.

5. ENSURE THAT YOUR EXPLANATIONS HAVE BEEN UNDERSTOOD, AND REPEAT THEM AS OFTEN AS NECESSARY.

Hearing an explanation and not understanding is frustrating. Having to ask to hear it again and *still* not understanding is embarrassing. At that point, most students just fake it, nodding and saying thank you. It’s up to instructors to regularly determine whether the material has been understood and make the adjustments needed for all students to learn at the same rate.

6. ILLUSTRATE CONCEPTS WITH POWERFUL, MEANINGFUL EXAMPLES.

Here, too, it’s important to put ourselves in the shoes of our students, who are inexperienced and struggling to master the knowledge we consider so obvious. Examples are bridges that help them go from the unknown to the understood, but the route must be accessible! Furthermore, some examples are *time-sensitive*. An image we used in the past to illustrate a concept may prove inappropriate after a certain length of time: the average student will always be 17 to 19 years old, but examples can get stale-dated. It’s important to make sure they remain *current*.

7. ALWAYS TRY TO IMPROVE YOUR EXPLANATIONS.

Explanations can always be fine-tuned. The best time to do so is right after you realize they haven’t produced the intended effect. And even if a given explanation has worked well in the past, there’s no guarantee it will do so in the future. Students change and classes differ. We must try to give explanations that are as vivid and appropriate as possible, while at the same time keeping in mind that understanding that results in sustainable learning is an objective to be pursued at every turn.

Source: WEIMER, M. Are We Clear? Tips for Crafting Better Explanations. *Faculty Focus*, 18 November 2015 [facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/are-we-clear-tips-for-crafting-better-explanations/].

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