

Learning and Teaching

A Best Practice Guide on Explaining Skills

The best kind of teacher is one who helps you do what you couldn't do yourself, but doesn't do it for you (Child, Aged 8).

Explaining Skills

Good explaining skills are central to teaching, and have the following characteristics: clarity, coherence and audibility.

A range of strategies may be used to enhance explaining effectiveness, and are set out below. Before reading on, why not make a short list of the strategies that you most employ in your teaching?

Clear explaining is helped by:

1. Providing an [overview](#) of content: 'In today's class, I am going to cover three particular aspects of this topic: First, I will look at...; secondly...' etc.'
2. Providing this overview in visual format.
3. [Organising content under headings](#): 'We will examine the first aspect under two main headings: [specify headings \(e.g. social and cultural\)](#)'. (Such sequencing is important for holistic, logical and sequential learners. It is also makes very good sense to do this, anyway).
4. Showing how each NEW point builds on the one before. It is good practice to engage students in doing this as well, because it will allow both you and your students to identify gaps in understanding: 'I am now going to add a further example here. As I do so, think carefully about its importance and why I am introducing it.' 'Who could say what comes next?'
5. Providing [depth](#) of coverage on a selected number of topics rather than attempting to cover everything, which will only engage students in surface learning rather than deep learning.
6. Encouraging student engagement: 'That was my final point. Now I'd like you to spend some time thinking about the content of today's class: What were the key points? How do they connect to each other? What could be explained further? Who could summarise?'
7. Allocating levels of importance: 'The point I am now going to explain is [central](#). I would therefore like you to pay careful attention to it. As I explain it, I would like you to THINK about its implications for (state specific context for this). Do you UNDERSTAND its significance?' (Note redirecting of responsibility from teacher to student. If the point is so central, then it is crucial to assess understanding before proceeding). Note also

the focus on 'significance' which is a sharper approach.

8. Demonstrating or exemplifying – examples are invaluable and demonstrations perhaps even more so, but note guidelines given below on using demonstrations.
9. Providing [analogies and examples](#). 'This is similar to... or... 'A good example of this is...'
Better still, ask students to provide their own examples, illustrations or analogies.
10. [Explaining common mistakes](#) is also a very helpful explaining strategy: 'A mistake commonly made when doing this is?' Or: 'Always remember that in order to carry this out, you should/must do the following:...'
11. Paraphrasing – 'Another way to explain this is as follows'. Or: 'Let me state that in another way'. Paraphrasing may be necessary when dealing with more complex content, or when it is evident that meaning is not being understood.
12. Obtaining accurate feedback: inaccuracies should be taken as an indication that the explanation has not been grasped.
13. Using highly specific questions to assess understanding. '[Do you all understand that?](#)' is [much too vague](#). Rather, refer to a specific point, concept or aspect, directing the question in a way that conveys specificity and the requirement to receive an answer which is accurate.
14. Closing out each point using appropriate emphasis and phrasing to convey what should have been understood.
15. Critically, using simple language, short sentences and a clear, audible voice. (Research analysing teacher transcripts frequently points to the complexity of teacher language, too much teacher talk and unrelated/irrelevant answering of student questions).

Demonstrations:

- Because demonstrations are invaluable in developing understanding, they therefore play a key role in student-centred learning. They should also prove effective when students use them to teach each other.
- To enhance the benefits of a demonstration to students:
 - Ensure that it can be seen by all; if not, use alternating groups.
 - Explain the purpose of the demonstration, ensuring that this is understood.
 - Find out whether or not it is actually helping to promote understanding; build on responses given.
 - Ensure that pacing is unhurried. How will you know? Provide 'hands on' experimentation.

- Carefully time your introduction of the demonstration to the teaching sequence.
- At the planning stage, ensure that all safety matters have been taken into account and managed.
- Ensure there is follow-up and application.
- Allow students time to ask questions about areas of difficulty, 'muddiest points'.
- Allow students to offer alternative views, suggestions or solutions (hypothesising).

Summary of Explaining Skills:

1. Provide signposts ('First, I will look at' etc.).
2. Select only the most relevant content/make key decisions about this.
3. Reinforce sequencing ('I am now going to add a new point'): This is called Linking.
4. Encourage student participation: 'Could anyone summarise the most important points so far? Explain in your own words to the person next to you'. Reverse roles.
5. Use headings when organising content (social, political, economic). This is called Framing.
6. Highlight points using a form of wording that will bring emphasis to them. This is called Focusing.
7. Demonstrate and give examples.
8. In sequencing material, move from less complex to more complex content, from the known to the unknown (help students see progression as it occurs).
9. Use examples, demonstrations and analogies; draw upon own and student experiences to exemplify.
10. Evaluate: **test assumptions and teach accordingly**.

Evaluating explaining skills: the following is a framework for doing this. **Answer Yes or No to each:**

Opening

Did the opening set out an overview of the key points?

Were visual aids used to consolidate?

Did the opening help establish rapport with the group?

Did it indicate sub-headings and how each would build on the other?

Was sequencing logical?

The Key Points

Was each new point clearly/strategically introduced?

Was emphasis sufficiently placed on each so as to alert students to its introduction?

Was each summarised during closure?

Did students summarise during closure?

Were beginnings and endings clearly indicated?

Development of the Key Points

Were examples used? Were analogies used? Were demonstrations used?

Was rephrasing used where necessary?

Was pausing used to promote thinking time?

Presentation

Were the group members able to see and hear?

Was eye contact used?

Were audio-visual media effectively used?

Was vocabulary appropriate to the group?

Was voice intonation used for emphasis?

Were vagueness and ambiguity avoided?

(Adapted from Brown and Atkins (1988), 'Effective Teaching in Higher Education').

Carry on to next page

Some underlying principles are:

1. The aim of explaining is to promote understanding, not to confuse students by overwhelming them with information.
2. It is impossible for students to remember everything. However, clear sequencing and the presenting of information in small, related chunks should have some positive advantages (BEM principle).
3. Attention spans are short.
4. Effective voice usage is critical when explaining. It is therefore important to vary the tone, speak neither too slowly nor too rapidly, PAUSE, and give emphasis to key points.
5. Follow your explanation of each point with a summary highlighting relevance and value. Relate the point to a tangible context (a professional domain, the class textbook, or an assignment yet to be completed).
6. Allow your students to ask questions, summarise or comment.

References

Brown, G. and Wragg, E. (1997). *Explaining*. London: Routledge