

Feedback on clear explanations

Explanation is central to almost every aspect of teaching. Collecting feedback on students' perceptions of whether your explanations are clear identifies whether your students feel your teaching assisted them in understanding the subject matter. Without student understanding no explanation can be said to be clear. In the end, you will only know whether students found the explanation helpful if you ask them.

There are many reasons why your students may have responded that your subject does not provide clear explanations. Students may not have been aware of what they were supposed to learn or you may be trying to cover too much material instead of helping students to see the main points and their relationship to one other. There may have been too few opportunities for students to demonstrate that they understood what was being explained or they may not have known what to do if they didn't understand the material.

This brief guide suggests ways in which you can improve the clarity of your explanations. It outlines how clarity can be achieved through sequencing the key points, controlling your voice and gestures, including questions in your presentation and supporting explanations with audio-visual aids. At the end of the guide is a short list of resources for further reading.

Clarity in explanations

A clear explanation requires more than knowing the subject matter. It is also necessary to present the material in a way that allows students to develop an understanding of the topic. Good explainers start by finding out what students already know about the topic so that they can vary the level of explanation as needed, weaving in student contributions and seeking feedback on what students understood from their explanation. Once the appropriate level for student understanding is clear there are a few additional aspects of explanations that relate to their clarity.

Identifying key ideas, concepts & principles

An explanation is made up of a series of concepts, principles or ideas. Information such as terms, names, dates, places provide the facts and terminology of a topic. Concepts are the organising structure for these facts. A principle or rule may be drawn from your concepts, such as "All lectures have a beginning, middle and end". Examples clarify terms and concepts and add interest to the topic. It is best to use examples that have meaning from the students' background and experiences. Examples can come from analogies, personal experiences, humorous anecdotes, displays, diagrams, illustrations, real materials, models, pictures videotapes, computer simulations, plus many more.

Clearly structured explanations

A major element leading to clarity in an explanation comes from the way you link the key concepts. Many presentations benefit from a logical linear sequence, most commonly involving an introduction, an exposition followed by a summation of the main points. Cannon (1988) describes this structure as: Introduction & overview; First main point; Second main point; Third main point; Fourth main point; Summary and

conclusions. Not all explanations lend themselves to this linear sequence. Brown (1978) suggests some variations to the structure of explanations include comparative structure, problem-focused structure, argument structure.

Coherent sequencing of material

The opening of an explanation forms a kind of advanced organiser for the students. Openings can also arouse curiosity and refresh their memories about what they have already learnt in previous explanations. Following the opening will be a sequence of key points often progressing from the simple to complex; concrete to abstract; generalization to particular or whole to the detail.

Effective use of voice & gesture

Modulation and varying the pace of your voice adds interest to your explanation. No matter what the topic, sincerity and enthusiasm warms the audience, so try to relax before speaking. Humour will add interest to explanation but avoid telling jokes. Think about what you are saying and align your voice and body language with the message. For example, movement can be used to help make important points or signal a new topic by moving to different part of the room. Beware of distracting gestures that can split students attention from what you are saying. Ensure that you face the audience so that you can make eye contact with your audience.

Check understanding

Involvement of students is key to their understanding. Therefore an important skill is to listen to students and use and extend the ideas they bring into the discussion. Baume & Baume (1996) suggest checking that the students have understood with questions that seek information, provoke discussion or direct further inquiry. Try not to ask "Why" questions which put students on the defensive. Also avoid closed "Yes/no" questions. Personalising questions so that students need to answer "what does this mean to me" has been shown to be a strong motivator for students.

Use of Audio visual aids

Not all students will follow a verbal explanation. Pictures, models and video can all enhance students understanding of complex concepts. However, the most boring presentations involve a careless use of visual aids. Whenever you use audio-visual aids check the physical location to ensure all the equipment is available and working. Overhead Transparencies work best if they use simple sentences written in a clear, large typeface. The worst OHTs are photocopied straight out of books.

Further Reading

- > Brown, G. (1978). Lecturing and explaining. London: Methuen.
- > Baume, D. & Baume, C. (1996). Making presentations. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
- > Cannon, R. (1992) Lecturing. Campbelltown, NSW: HERDSA.
- > Gibbs, G. & Jenkins, A. (1992). Teaching large classes in higher education. London: Kogan Page.

It would be appropriate to take your initial response to your student feedback results to your academic supervisor. The IML can also assist in interpreting your student feedback results. If you like to discuss any aspect of your teaching, please contact the IML liaison person within your faculty. Details are on the IML web site:

<http://www.iml.uts.edu.au/about/contact.html>

The IML welcomes feedback, suggestions and contributions to this guide on improving student feedback. Please contact Peter.Kandlbinder@uts.edu.au with suggestions for future items of interest.