

USING PROPS TO HELP EXPLAIN DESTINATION AND JOURNEY

Another way to help learners to get clarity is by using well-chosen props. A good prop is like the right kind of bait on a fishing line. It will attract attention and curiosity. Different props can evoke different sensory responses. They can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted. Many props achieve several of these. They can also arouse powerful emotions such as curiosity, puzzlement, amusement, sympathy, and even disgust, also known as the yuk factor!



A history teacher we've worked with brings in two personal items before he starts teaching his learners about the First World War. The first item is a German sniper's brass bullet that wounded his grandfather in the neck. He explains how he can still remember the scar on one of side of his grandpa's neck where the bullet went in, and the scar on the other where the surgeons took it out. He tells the learners that the bullet missed the carotid artery by millimetres – they were that close to having a different history teacher! The second item is a 16-page letter written by his grandfather from the front line. Not only does the letter tell a gripping story about some of his experiences, but there isn't a single spelling or grammatical mistake in it. This from a working-class lad who'd left school at the age of 14. He uses both props to help learners to be clear about what he's looking for from them. He wants each of them to create a series of letters written from 'the front' which captivate the reader and are grammatically correct.

It's amazing how props can get learners' attention and help us to level up the quality of our explanations. And the better our explanations, the more clarity our learners will have. In the next chapter, we'll show how teachers can develop the explanation skills of their learners. When learners can explain clearly what they've just learned, it further consolidates their learning. When they can explain and demonstrate their new learning, the teacher has tangible feedback that shows they really have got it.

VERBAL EXPLANATIONS AND WORDSMITH-ERY

Using words alone to explain things is one of the hardest of skills, although one well worth working on. Language is inherently vague and open to misinterpretation. To explain things using precise language, so there is no room for misunderstanding, takes careful thought and practice. The example of the string 'trick' earlier in this chapter suggested that it would take real linguistic skills to explain the steps to others, simply and precisely, without visual support.

This is why we strongly suggest that you make your explanations multi-sensory, as there are more hooks for learners to grab that enable their understanding. Having said that, many learners do like listening to words that are well chosen and well used. Stories and anecdotes are a great way to explain things and introduce topics, as in the example of the history teacher and his grandfather.

TELLING STORIES

Stories can be personal, humorous, shocking, or instructive; they can be messages of hope and insight; they may contain values and perspectives. They are brilliant at generating emotional responses that get learners engaged. Research suggests that storytelling and story-listening capacities are hardwired into the brain. They are the basic way in which all human beings learn about the world, about themselves, and about each other. We've been using stories to convey messages for thousands of years. Above all, the best stories are multi-sensory and highly memorable. All that's really necessary is to make sure that any anecdote, analogy, parable, tale, case history, or story that you use with your learners is relevant to the key elements or themes of whatever it is you want to explain. For more on this read Nick Owen's brilliant book, *The Magic of Metaphor*.⁸

One of the easiest ways to weave stories into your explanations is to consider the main points that you want to get across. Now ask yourself whether any of these points can be followed by a 'for instance', or whether they remind you of a story from your own experience, such as something that happened in last year's class when they learned the topic. Stories are everywhere. Your own life is a huge resource bank of stories, and you'll also find them in newspapers and books and on television and radio. If you think about it, all life is an unfolding story; we cannot live without them. The only thing to add is that stories work much better if your learners can make strong associations with them. So choose your stories with your learners in mind.

One teacher we know has often used the following story when he thinks his learners need to take more responsibility for themselves and their learning:

When I was your age, about 12 or 13, I used to live in a house near a girls' school. Sometimes I'd get home from my school before the girls walked down my street. I'd stand in the window watching them and say to myself, 'If only that cute one with the black hair and turned-up nose would turn left up my pathway, ring the bell, and ask me out, life would be wonderful.' And do you know what? She never did. And I soon realised that if I was going to have the life I wanted, I'd have to change my strategies and get a bit more proactive.

USING METAPHORS, ANALOGIES, AND STORIES

The word metaphor comes from the Greek *metapherein* meaning 'to transfer'. Thus, a metaphor explains or describes something in terms of something else. It makes a point

of comparison between two otherwise unrelated objects. This could be a word, a phrase, an idea, or a story.

At its simplest we could talk about a *new-born day*, which links the dawn and the beginning of a human journey. Such comparisons can offer unexpected and engaging perspectives about the nature of early morning – or babies!

A more complex metaphor would be:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his life plays many parts.

As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 7

The world is not a stage, but Shakespeare draws a comparison between the two to suggest a relationship between the mechanics of the world and the lives of the people who inhabit it. Similarly, in the teacher's story of waiting for the girl he fancied to knock on his door, the courage he requires to ask her out is not the same as taking greater responsibility for learning, but the mechanisms are the same. The link is made: it speaks to the listeners in their world and it stays in the mind.

Using metaphors, similes, analogies, and stories can help learners to get a firmer grasp on what the teacher is trying to get across. A teacher of English we've worked with explores the relationship between Romeo and Juliet in terms of weather metaphors. Learners map out the transitions in the lovers' relationship with ideas such as sunny, bright, dark, spring like, cloudy, and storm-tossed. Such techniques can really help learners to understand how the quality and energy of the relationship between the lovers changes over the short time that they're together.

It's often helpful to choose metaphors, analogies, and stories that learners already have an association with. This means getting into their world, perhaps utilising popular culture such as pop music, television programmes, teen magazines, and sports teams. This is something we encouraged you to do in Chapter 2 on pre-assessment. If you took the time to establish what your learners are interested in when you first met them back at the start of the school year, it will pay dividends when you come to use these methods.

One teacher we know works with a football obsessed class. He uses this knowledge to link whatever he teaches them to the world of football. This gives him a way into talking about managing information (tactics); structural processes (player formations such as 4-4-2 or 5-3-2); how you build up a piece of work step by step to achieve/score your goal (passing); when one way isn't working you use a different technique or strategy, or when a piece of work doesn't meet the criteria you do another draft (substitution); and pointing out the poor use of KASH skills (yellow card). One of the beauties of working with metaphors is that they not only enable clarity and engagement, but they can really open up new creativity and perspective in the way you and your learners see and appreciate what they are required to do for a topic.

Other examples to consider include:

- ■ How is writing an A* essay like great dancing?
- ■ How are the steps to completing this excellent piece of work like going on a first date?
- ■ How are the ingredients for excellence in this topic like a recipe?
- ■ How are the different levels of work in this topic like a computer game?
- ■ How is the journey through this topic like Formula 1 racing?

Two points. First, the more unlikely the comparison, the more creative, fun, and memorable the exploration can be. Second, although the comparisons can invite generalisation, the work that results can often show teacher and learners alike where they find value in the topic and what they would like to pursue more deeply.

REHEARSING WITH COLLEAGUES



The best way to develop your skill at explaining is to practise it. Why not get together with some colleagues to do this and give each other feedback? You might watch each other explain the finer points of a quality piece of work by annotating it or highlighting the sections that you want your learners to particularly take note of. You might help each other to devise stories or analogies that bring clarity to individual learners or to a whole class. Practising your explanation techniques with colleagues can be a great way to hone your skills, especially when everyone has a go and offers each other constructive feedback. Even better, why not collaborate to agree on the relevant success criteria and use it to rate your performances. This is a great way to level up your own skills and to support each other's development.