

My Favorite Assignment

Picture Perfect Explanations: Practicing Efficiency, Accuracy, and Organization

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Instructor Notes

Summary Note to Instructor:

The following details are intended to help guide your implementation of this in-class activity, or a version of it that best suits your needs. Also included in the online repository are slide deck and image files for your use.

Assignment Overview:

Students practice giving instructions to their peers in order to *gain awareness* of the difficulty of technical explanations followed by an *opportunity to improve* on them. The activity includes one student viewing a complex image and attempting to instruct his/her classmates on how to draw that image.

Steps to the Assignment

1. Provide Rationale to Class: The assignment is best conducted after first briefing the class on (a) the needs of precise and efficient sharing of technical explanations/instructions within business contexts and (b) best practices for sharing instructions/explanations within business contexts. This can be accomplished through previously assigned course readings and/or in-class lecture. The available slide deck contains teaching points for in-class lecture.
2. Explain the Exercise: The class is instructed that they are going to operate like a supervisor explaining a set of instructions to his/her crew at work. To simulate the professional challenge, the class is told, a complex image will stand in an analogy for any complex industry-specific instructions a supervisor might have to give in a given field. Given a complex image as the “task,” it will thus be the supervisor’s job to get the crew (the rest of the class) to individually recreate the image.

To begin the exercise, the class instructor should choose any one student to come to the front of the class and act as the supervisor doing the explaining. This supervisor-explainer is then provided with a complex image that the rest of the class cannot see (thus simulating the on-the-job crew who truly needs their supervisor to give them details on the task at hand). The whole class is instructed that the way the exercise will work is simple in nature: the supervisor-explainer with the image must verbally explain (out loud) to the rest of the class work crew how to draw the image on the page the supervisor-explainer student has been provided. The supervisor-explainer will be given three minutes to give instructions to crew. The rest of the class should get out (or be given) scrap paper on which to draw the image and should actually draw it according to the instructions as the instructions are being given.

Note: Students often ask at this stage if they are allowed to ask questions of their supervisor peer. That is up to the course instructor’s discretion, but it has been found to be a more demonstrative exercise when questions are not allowed, at least during the first image. This helps establish the difficulty in providing effective explanations.

3. Conduct the Exercise – First Image: The first supervisor-explainer is given three minutes to give the instructions verbally. At this point, choose another student and have them come up to the front with instructions that they must continue the explanations. The students drawing should

continue to add to or modify their existing work, and they should not yet be shown the original image. The second supervisor-explainer often adds corrective comments after seeing the first image, causing the students drawing to feel the need to scribble out or erase or give up on certain aspects of their drawing. This conflict is a valuable moment for the students to realize the difficulty in effective explanation accuracy.

After the second supervisor-explainer completes two minutes of explanation, allow a third student to be the last to give explanations for another two minutes.

4. Review and Debrief – First Image: Following the three students' explanations, reveal the image to the class (it can be effective to first walk around the room, surveying all of the images and asking the students to do the same of their neighbors). Students should be given a moment to survey the original image, after which, the course instructor should lead the class in a debriefing session.

The debriefing session is perhaps the most important element of the exercise.

During this debriefing time, the instructor should lead the class in identifying what elements of the image they were more/less successful with recreating as well as (re-) identifying best practices that may have allowed the explanations to be more effective. Instructors will likely find ample opportunities to draw the students suggestions back to the best-practices previously covered in lecture/reading. This can often be accomplished by starting with simple questions like "What do you have right?" "... wrong?" "What is missing?" "Why did it end up that way?" and "If we were to do this again, what would you suggest a supervisor do differently ensure the instructions produced better results from each member of the crew?"

Best-practice suggestion identified by the student should be enumerated on a whiteboard (or other display surface). Common best-practices that can be (re-) identified in the exercise context include: (a) Provide an overview before detailing specifics, (b) Give the instructions based on a clear organization/pattern (such as Left to Right or, left/middle/right thirds of the page, etc.), (c) Use reference points that the audience knows (or that you create for them) to make subsequent instructions clearer and more efficient, and (d) Be purposeful about what level of detail you choose to (not) give.

5. Conduct the Exercise & Debriefing Again – Second Image: Following the debriefing (which may require a the instructor take the lead in a new mini-lecture if the students are not yet able to identify how to apply the previously covered best-practices to the task), a second (and increasingly complex) image should be attempted. Three new supervisor-explainers should be subsequently chosen to give instructions to their crew. This should be followed by a second debriefing. In the second debriefing, specific attention should be paid to whether or not the supervisors followed the best-practices previously identified in the first debriefing. Modifications to those suggestions to improve crew performance should noted on the whiteboard as well.
6. Conduct the Exercise & Debriefing for a Third (and Final) Time: If time allows, a third attempted image of increasing complexity should be conducted followed by a wrap-up reminder of best-practices after the reveal of the final image. This third attempt is valuable when possible. It allows for more students to take the role of both crew and supervisor, it allows the difficulty of providing effective explanations to sink in as a professional reality not a coincidence, and it allows the students an opportunity to actually begin implementing and even mastering some of the best-practices.

When including this third instance, course instructors are likely to see their students progress through a three-stage relationship with the best-practices discussed: (1) suggestions that are only marginally attended to; (2) suggestions that actually seem valuable but are forgotten in the thick-of-things; (3) suggestions that now seem critical to prioritize but that take work to master.

Variation Note: A variation on the exercise would be to allow a set of three students to collaborate on their instructions prior to delivering them to the class. This may be best conducted as a variation on the third round only, providing the students more time to strategically and purposefully deploy the best-practices discussed.

Assessment:

Because this is an in-class exercise, it is recommended that this activity not be graded for points beyond what might generally impact a “participation” grade in the course.