

UNITED WISDOM

Explaining to others as a test of your own understanding

Freedom and Action

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *men learn while they teach.*

Seneca, Moral Letters to Lucilius, VII.8; Richard Mott Gummere's English translation (1917). This short clause retains the edition's lowercase opening. The letter concerns mutual moral influence, rather than an experimentally established learning method.

What this article is about

Imagine someone who has done a job well for years and one day needs to explain it to a newcomer. The sequence is familiar, yet a simple question, “Why does it work this way?”, unexpectedly stops the conversation. This may reveal a gap, or something different: some of the skill resides in actions that have not yet acquired words. Confident speech, useful demonstration and understanding the reasons turn out to be different achievements. This article explores how conversation helps distinguish them while respecting the listener's own purpose. We consider prior knowledge, examples and counterexamples, the cost of excessive simplification and an honest return to a missing reason. Seneca, Confucian texts and Aristotle offer different languages for the question; limited evidence on expecting to teach adds an empirical perspective with clear boundaries. The practical outcome is a better account of what we can explain, what needs checking and where cooperation is needed.

I. A familiar sequence still leaves questions

Explaining reveals the structure of a skill because familiar action has to be connected afresh to its reasons. Imagine the manager of a small workshop. She allocates orders every week and readily recognizes which should come first. She tells a new employee to start with urgent orders, then handle the rest. But the employee points to two orders with the same deadline. One needs a scarce material; the other can be completed immediately. The instruction now allows different decisions. The manager's choice had seemed obvious because she was also considering stock, promises to customers and the possibility of a delayed delivery. These conditions were absent from her explanation, although they shaped her work every day.

It is tempting to take the question as a sign that the newcomer is slow to understand. That preserves the impression of a clear instruction and places the difficulty entirely in the listener. Yet the question makes the procedure itself more visible. “Urgent first” concealed several

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

criteria that could conflict. Explaining the choice requires naming which criterion takes priority, who can authorize exceptions and what indicates a change of circumstances. The conversation gives an experienced person a chance to see their own work in greater detail. This is a hypothetical example: it illustrates the structure of a difficulty, rather than proving that every conversation improves production outcomes.

Quiet accuracy also deserves respect. Someone may recognize fabric quality by touch or find the rhythm of a movement without immediately turning that distinction into sentences. Having no ready explanation does not establish that the skill is imaginary. Sometimes it is more useful to demonstrate two pieces, let the learner compare them and then refine the vocabulary. The question is which part of the work can be passed on in words, which through observation and which needs the learner's own practice. Confusing these modes gives eloquence too much weight and judges actual abilities by the ease of describing them.

The first check is therefore modest: reconstruct the path from a decision to the signs supporting it. In the workshop, this means showing which information the manager checked and what would change if the stock situation were different. Another person gains access to a chain of reasons and, with it, a place to raise a question. A broken chain is not a verdict on the expert. It identifies the next check: an omitted condition, an unexpressed skill or a rule that previously worked only in a familiar situation.

II. An explanation builds from what is already known

A comprehensible explanation depends on the listener's starting point. The same words can offer shared ground to two specialists and mean very little to a newcomer. In Nicomachean Ethics, VI.3, Aristotle connects teaching to what is already known and distinguishes kinds of knowledge. This is a philosophical classification, rather than a modern experimental learning model. The starting point matters here: correct terminology alone does not make reasoning accessible. We need to establish which distinction the listener can actually use before building the next one on it.

For the newcomer, “urgent” means the nearest deadline. For the manager, it means the risk of breaking a promise once the entire sequence of work is considered. She can begin with one order: the material arrives tomorrow, assembly takes a day and the customer needs the result on Friday. She can then show a second order and ask what changes. This connects the concept to observable conditions. It also tests the manager's own term: does it include duration, spare time and supplier dependencies, or has she used it so broadly that it no longer distinguishes cases?

Establishing a starting point need not become an interrogation. “How would you choose the first order now?” usually offers more than “Do you understand at all?” The first invites a

description of an available way to act; the second can sound like a demand to confirm authority. The listener benefits from knowing why the question is being asked. The manager can say that she wants to see where to continue and check whether she has left out an important condition. An incorrect answer then becomes information about the distance between two accounts of the task, rather than a personal characterization.

This connection works in both directions. Sometimes the newcomer knows something the experienced employee has missed: changed delivery terms, a new request form or a particular promise to a customer. An explanation treated as a one-way passage from the knowledgeable to the ignorant can overlook that information. Mutual clarification distinguishes insufficient training from an outdated rule. Experience retains its value without becoming immune to changed circumstances. The other person's contribution helps through a concrete difference in available information, rather than through a mysterious effect of an “outside perspective.”

There is a limit, too. Explaining how to sort orders does not require first conveying the workshop's entire history and the whole language of management. The necessary starting concepts are those without which the next choice would be arbitrary. An excessive introduction overloads the conversation and may conceal a missing main rule. A useful check is to ask which new decision is now possible. If the listener still cannot begin after a long account, return to the starting point and choose a smaller, testable piece.

III. The listener's question has its own purpose

The other person has a task of their own, so their participation in checking our understanding needs agreement. The manager wants to clarify how she chooses; the newcomer needs to take their first orders safely. These purposes may align, but alignment cannot be assumed. If an experienced employee uses every meeting for an extended inquiry into their own reasons, the listener receives someone else's intellectual work in place of the help they need. Their time, degree of participation and right to end the conversation remain material conditions, even when the speaker sincerely wants to improve the explanation.

In Letter VII.8–9, Seneca connects mutual improvement with caution about public approval. His moral context differs from teaching a work procedure. It nevertheless helps frame a question about the relationship: does the conversation attend to the other person, or are they mainly needed to witness our competence? Applying that question here is our editorial move. We do not derive a universal teaching technique from the ancient letter or attribute a modern theory of feedback to Seneca.

The difference sometimes appears in the response to an awkward question. “We have already covered that” protects the previous presentation while revealing little about the difficulty. “Where did the connection become unclear?” leaves room to clarify it. The latter wording is no

magic solution: the person may be tired, embarrassed or unwilling to discuss the issue now. A written example, brief demonstration or later conversation can be offered. Declining to answer does not prove disinterest, and quiet agreement does not prove understanding. These signs are ambiguous and require care.

Participation is especially vulnerable when the speaker also evaluates the listener's work. The newcomer may infer which answer is expected and produce it instead of describing an actual difficulty. This need not be regarded as deception: keeping their position in the group may seem more important than precision in a learning conversation. It helps to distinguish checking the instruction itself from evaluating the individual. For instance, both participants can find a place where a written rule admits two reasonable decisions. The difficulty acquires an external object, and the person no longer has to establish their worth with every reply.

Both participants can bring the conversation to a stop. The speaker may say they cannot yet justify an answer and will return after checking. The listener may ask for just the minimum needed today. This does not destroy the educational purpose. A clear boundary makes it possible to agree on a next step without an implicit obligation to continue indefinitely. Checking our understanding through another person works best as cooperative activity in which each participant can see the benefits and the costs.

IV. Simplicity needs to preserve decisive conditions

Simplification helps convey an idea while it preserves the distinctions on which a decision depends. “Take the most urgent order” is convenient but insufficient in our scene: it removes the dependency on materials. The opposite difficulty arises if the manager lists twenty variables without showing how to use them in sequence. A complete inventory is not yet a usable rule. We need a small set of conditions, the relationships among them and an account of when the simplified version ceases to apply.

For a first day, the manager might suggest this: compare promised deadlines and the availability of materials first; if both orders cannot be completed in time, agree a change to the promise with the responsible person. This is still a simplification. It does not describe downtime costs, special agreements or equipment limitations. It does preserve a decisive possibility: noticing a conflict before it becomes an unacknowledged broken promise. A boundary can sit alongside it: the rule applies to ordinary orders without special requirements; an unusual case needs joint discussion. The learner gains a working starting point and knows where to stop using it.

An analogy can make this clearer. An order queue might be compared to preparing several dishes: some steps wait for ingredients while others proceed in parallel. But a kitchen's properties do not automatically transfer to production. Orders involve promises to people,

documents and distinct decision rights. Once the image makes sense, ask where it stops helping. This checks the explanation better than admiration for its elegance. A successful metaphor reveals a relationship while leaving the precise account of the task necessary.

In the Confucian Analects, II.15, learning and thought are presented as mutually necessary. This is not an experiment on analogies. The text offers a moral and intellectual setting in which acquired knowledge requires thinking, and thinking remains connected to learning. Here it prompts a question: has a shortened account become a persuasive story detached from checkable material? A simple formulation should allow a return to its reasons. Otherwise, its apparent clarity asks too much of the listener.

A useful sign of preserved understanding is the ability to unfold a short rule in a specific case. The manager shows which promise she is considering, where the delivery date came from and who can change the priority. The newcomer can then work back from the two orders to the general rule. If this works in only one direction, look for an omitted condition. Simplicity becomes an achievement when it lets someone reconstruct the reasoning, as well as repeat a convenient phrase.

V. A counterexample shows how far a rule reaches

Understanding becomes more precise when someone can identify a case requiring their explanation to change. Imagine an order with a distant deadline whose only suitable batch of material will be unavailable after today. A queue based simply on deadlines postpones it, even though waiting may remove the possibility of keeping the promise at all. This does not refute the importance of deadlines. It reveals another condition: some opportunities disappear before the result is due. Buying the material and starting production now need to be considered separately. What previously looked like one action, “taking an order,” turns out to involve several decisions.

When checking an explanation, change one condition at a time. What if the material is already available? What if the customer agrees to wait? What if buying early takes money needed for another job? Changing everything at once can create the impression that no answer is adequate. A sequence of changes makes the boundary of a particular rule visible. The most extraordinary scenario is unnecessary. A plausible case is enough to reveal a concealed assumption: constant availability, identical consequences of delay or decision rights held by the person making the choice.

A counterexample from the listener need not be an objection to the speaker as a person. The newcomer notices that deliveries do not run on a holiday. The manager can treat this as a useful correction to the starting information. If every counterexample instead encounters a demand to acknowledge authority first, the explanation loses its ability to improve. Defending it

begins to cost more than preserving a reasonable decision. Cooperation benefits from being able to say that the earlier rule is adequate for these cases, while this one needs an added condition. That response preserves accumulated experience instead of declaring it entirely mistaken.

The reverse case is awkward too: the listener proposes an exception with no supporting evidence yet. Checking understanding does not require treating every hypothesis as a new rule. Ask whether the situation has occurred, what supports the suggestion and how much the consequences matter. Even an unlikely possibility merits attention when an error would be costly, but attention does not mean immediately changing the entire procedure. The speaker demonstrates a way of handling uncertainty: distinguishing an established fact, a possible scenario and a decision that needs further information.

In Nicomachean Ethics, VI.7–8, Aristotle emphasizes particular circumstances in practical judgment. We use this as philosophical support for distinguishing the general from the particular; it does not test our production example. The modern implication is our own: a well-explained rule should withstand a return to circumstances. That return helps reveal what someone has learned—a familiar sequence of words or a way to consider a new case.

VI. A persuasive explanation still needs checking against reality

Conversation can expose a gap without guaranteeing that the answer found is correct. Two people may agree because an explanation sounds coherent and fits their shared expectations. If the manager has the delivery date wrong, careful reasoning based on it remains mistaken. Checking understanding should therefore accompany checking the starting information. An agreement, actual stock, the result of a small safe trial or a competent specialist's assessment does different work from an accessible story. Each connects the explanation to something that does not depend solely on the participants' agreement.

The study by Nestojko, Bui, Kornell and Bjork (2014) offers limited empirical support. In two experiments, expecting to teach was associated with better organized recall of studied passages; participants did not actually teach anyone. We read the publisher's abstract and methodological note, not the closed full text. The note reports that a different classification of questions produced a nonsignificant interaction test. Consequently, the study does not establish the benefit of every conversation proposed here, lasting mastery or transfer to running a workshop.

That limitation does not make the study useless. It helps distinguish expecting to explain, actually explaining and acting successfully afterwards. In our scene, someone can prepare a rule, present it well and still struggle with a new combination of orders. Each achievement has its own observable sign. Preparation appears in selecting material conditions; explanation in

making their connections accessible; application in a decision that accounts for actual constraints. Evaluating all three with one label, “understood,” can hide where the work remains unfinished.

Checking against reality also needs a scale appropriate to the consequences. An exercise can use fictional order cards and compare choices against specified conditions. A real promise to a customer requires checking actual deadlines and agreeing changes. Conversation alone is insufficient for dangerous equipment: established procedures and training apply. A long explanation does not authorize extending the scope of action. Recognizing this distinction belongs to mature use of knowledge, even when it limits a satisfying sense of confidence.

After a check, preserve the reason for the correction. “This is how we do it now” quickly loses why the rule changed. “Deliveries arrive on Thursdays; the earlier calculation assumed daily delivery” retains a clear reason that can be reconsidered when circumstances change again. The other person gains access to both the current answer and a way to correct it. Understanding becomes more robust through visible connections to information, rather than through a stronger speaking voice.

VII. Understanding can appear in an unexpected form

Repeating an explanation aloud is only one way to show that a distinction has been learned. A newcomer may choose the correct order, flag conflicting deadlines or ask a precise question while remaining quiet. The reverse is possible too: someone repeats a rule fluently without recognizing where it applies. Requiring only polished speech rewards the habit of performing. To find out what the listener can now do, offer an answer connected to the task: demonstrate a choice, compare two cases, draw a sequence or identify an unknown condition.

The manager might present three small examples and ask what information is missing from each decision. This can reveal more than repeating an instruction. The person recognizes that without the delivery date, the start of work cannot be determined reliably. Recognizing missing information, however, does not yet mean they know how to obtain it or have authority to change an agreement. The next question becomes more specific: where can the date be checked, who needs to hear about the conflict and what can be decided independently? Explanation develops into an actual possibility of action while preserving its limits.

Speed is not the same as depth. A quick answer may rest on years of practice or on guessing a familiar pattern. A slow answer may reflect difficulty with a term, careful comparison or fatigue. One sign cannot distinguish these causes. Instead of characterizing the person, return to the content: which step takes time, what is missing now and which format helps examine the case? This does not promise to remove every difference in ability. It does reduce the risk of mistaking a way of expressing understanding for the limit of understanding itself.

The speaker may also prefer answers in familiar words. Another form asks them to do extra work: read a diagram or follow an independent solution. It is useful to name their own limitation. “An oral explanation is easier for me to assess, but we can look at your sequence of actions together” distinguishes the teacher's need from the purpose of learning. This is a small form of intellectual honesty. It does not require providing every imaginable format, but it allows conditions to be discussed without an implicit demand that the listener become like the speaker.

A cooperative check ends when its purpose is sufficiently met for the agreed next step. The newcomer need not establish universal competence before taking one ordinary order with available supervision. The manager need not construct a complete theory of expertise to improve one instruction. A visible boundary helps end the conversation and keeps further learning possible. The other person ceases to be an endless test of our clarity; they remain a participant in work with a result of their own.

VIII. Correction reconnects explanation with responsibility

A recognized gap becomes useful through what happens next. If the manager says “I will check” and disappears, the newcomer is left with the earlier uncertainty and an additional dependency. Returning to the question needs a clear form: which information was found, what changed in the explanation and how to handle orders already accepted. There is no need for a public ritual of being wrong. A clear correction to those whose actions depended on the earlier answer, and an accessible record of the new condition, are enough.

For example: “I missed that the material arrives only on Thursdays. My explanation of the queue for these two orders was wrong. We reserve the material first, then agree when production starts; I will tell the customer about the timing.” The newcomer sees both the factual error and specific responsibility for its consequences. Correcting the answer is not left entirely to the person who noticed the gap. Otherwise, an invitation to ask questions can quietly become an obligation to supervise the senior person's work.

In the Confucian text II.17–18, knowledge, doubt and cautious action are connected. What matters here is the ability to name what is known and where doubt remains. We do not transfer historical ideas about office and moral cultivation to a modern workshop without preserving their differences. The editorial conclusion is ours: acknowledging the unknown should help direct a check, rather than become a solemn generality that leaves every practical question open. An honest formulation creates room for action precisely because it identifies a boundary.

Sometimes a new check changes much less than expected. The rule was correct, but the speaker omitted a starting concept. There is no need to declare all earlier experience mistaken.

Restore the missing link and see whether it is usable for the listener. Sometimes the ordinary procedure turns out to depend on personal exceptions that nobody else knew. That discovery may call for reconsidering how work is arranged. The learning conversation itself, however, does not authorize changing other people's decision rights and agreements. The problem discovered and the authority to correct it need to remain distinct.

Checking our understanding ends by changing our relationship to clarity. It becomes an ability to show a reason, receive a question, refine a boundary and return with a correction. We can remain confident in our experience while acknowledging work that still needs doing. In the initial scene, the newcomer gains a more usable rule and the manager a more precise language for her decision. Mutual explanation provides this concrete benefit without promising to turn every conversation into learning or every listener into our teacher.

What this means in practice

Choose a small question you actually need to explain to someone else. Agree the purpose and time first: perhaps ten minutes to discuss choosing the first order. Establish what the other person already knows and which decision they need to make afterwards. If they need only an instruction for today's work, respect that boundary; a separate inquiry into your own reasons can happen later.

State the rule and examine one ordinary case. Show which starting information has been checked, which conditions influence the choice and who can change the promise. Then offer a plausible changed case: delayed material, two orders with the same deadline or an opportunity that disappears before the result is due. Change one condition at a time to locate a particular boundary in the explanation. Invite the other person to show their decision in a useful form: words, a diagram, a sequence or a question about missing information.

Record the gap precisely enough to act on it. “I explained badly” offers little; “I omitted the delivery date that determines the queue” identifies the next check. Distinguish improving the explanation, checking a fact and learning an action. Find missing real information before making a new promise. Where a task is dangerous or requires specific qualifications, a learning exercise does not replace established authorization procedures.

Return with the result if you promised to do so. Say which answer changed and whose actions the correction affects. Neither gratitude for your honesty nor a duty to monitor all your reasons should be demanded from the listener. A brief outcome could be: “The rule for ordinary cases is now clear; when material is delayed, we pause the independent choice and agree the deadline.” This accessible boundary, rather than a flawless performance, shows that the conversation helped make the work clearer. The sequence is an editorial exercise; its effectiveness in a particular setting has not been separately established.

Key quotation

> *Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous.*

Confucius, Analects, II.15; James Legge's English translation (1861). In this article, the quotation keeps independent reasoning connected with studying actual material.

Connections between traditions

Positions compared	Connection for this question	Material boundary
Seneca, VII.8, mutual improvement; Confucian II.15, learning and thought	Passing on what has been learned requires continuing work by the speaker.	Seneca discusses moral company; Confucius relates learning and thinking. Neither text is an experimental study of teaching.
Aristotle, VI.3, teaching from what is known; Analects II.17–18, knowledge and doubt	Reasoned explanation distinguishes a starting basis from a point of uncertainty.	Aristotle's classification differs from the Confucian moral setting. This is an editorial comparison, not one shared doctrine.
Aristotle, VI.7–8, particular circumstances; Nestojko and colleagues, expecting to teach	Organizing learned material and applying it in a particular case need different checks.	Ancient philosophical reasoning and two experiments with text tasks have different subjects and methods of support; neither establishes workshop outcomes.

Three developed rows were chosen for their sufficient support in this topic. The expanded-map orientation is not filled with unsupported additional traditions. Similarity establishes neither historical borrowing nor independent origins.

Primary sources

1. Seneca. Moral Letters to Lucilius, VII. Richard Mott Gummere, 1917; VII.8–9 supply the epigraph and the question of mutual company and public approval. The displayed VII.1–12 were read; use is confined to the named passages.

2. Confucius. Analects, Book II. James Legge, The Chinese Classics, Volume I, 1861; II.15 and II.17–18 concern thinking, learning, knowledge and doubt. These passages were read with adjacent context, not the whole work.

3. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI. W. D. Ross; VI.3–5 and VI.7–10 support distinctions among kinds of knowledge, what is already known and particular circumstances. A philosophical primary text, not a pedagogical experiment.

4. Nestojko, J. F.; Bui, D. C.; Kornell, N.; Bjork, E. L. (2014). Expecting to teach enhances learning and organization of knowledge in free recall of text passages. Memory & Cognition, 42, 1038–1048. The publisher's abstract, author information and methodological note 1 were read; the closed full article was not. Use is limited to findings and the qualification visible in those passages.

The workshop scene and practical exercise are original editorial reasoning. Complete third-party source texts were not imported into the library or vector index. Rights in historical translations depend on the jurisdiction; UNKNOWN for other materials does not become a confirmed licence.

Tags

explanation, understanding, learning, competence, mastery, study, reflection, Seneca, Confucius, Aristotle, teaching expectancy, prior knowledge, analogy, counterexample, particular circumstances, tacit skill, causal connection, fact checking, learning conversation, right to question, listener dignity, feedback, intellectual honesty, knowledge boundaries, responsibility, instruction refinement, cooperation, practice

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.