What’s in the Bag?

This activity could work with almost any age of students. It will work best if you have a group of students who speak only English and a group of ELLs. The objective is to recognize multiple ways of making meaning.

1. Divide your classroom into groups of 4–5. In each group pick a student who speaks a language other than English at home. This student will describe objects to his or her group, but will be using their first language so that the other members of the group will not fully understand.
2. Place three random objects into a paper bag for each of the groups. These objects could be children’s toys, like a plastic dinosaur, or a feather.
3. The group leader will place his or her hand into the bag and attempt to describe the three objects to their group members. Since some may understand, and others may not, they will have to guess based on the leader’s gestures. As the leader describes the objects, other members will guess.
4. After about five minutes, allow the leader to draw, in addition to gesturing. Remember, the leader has not looked in the bag, but has only felt the three objects.
5. After a substantial amount of time, ask the groups to make their final guesses. Then, after the final guesses are turned in, look in the bag to see how close they were to being correct.

This activity is to demonstrate that there are multiple barriers in communication. So often we are expected to talk about things we only understand in part, much like the object in the bag. Also, sometimes people don’t speak the same language or understand our words verbally. However, there are also a variety of ways to make meaning and communicate. Gestures and drawing are just two of them.