

3. Checking for understanding

Tom Sherrington and Sara Stafford

What's the idea?

Seeking regular opportunities to formatively assess students' understanding and using this to inform what happens next in the lesson.

What does it mean?

Teachers need to know exactly where students are in their learning at all times (as far as that is possible) to best support mastery of a skill or concept. There are two stages to this process:

1. Gathering information by constantly checking for understanding and sampling student responses
2. Responding to this information with swift intervention to remedy misconceptions or mistakes, or to advance to the next level of challenge.

A key element of checking for understanding effectively is, as Doug Lemov calls it, 'rejecting self-report'. Even if a student says that they have understood, teachers cannot know for sure until they check.

What are the implications for teachers?

Think of questioning as information gathering; collect a sample of answers which represent the whole class' progress to inform next steps.

You can systematically check for understanding by asking a sample of students strategic questions which require them to demonstrate their learning; only move on when their responses show they are ready. When students answer correctly several times in a row, you can be confident that they have fully understood.

Avoid asking questions like, 'Has everyone understood? Can we move on?' as any response will be inconclusive. Similarly, asking 'Does anyone have any questions?' might not provide useful data. Ask the questions yourself so you avoid this self-report.

Finally, be prepared to adapt your lesson plan. Responding immediately to gaps in mastery is the most effective intervention.

TOP TIP / Checking can be in the form of verbal questions or written samples. You can use whole written exercises or quick collection aids like mini-whiteboards.

Want to know more?

- Lemov, D. (2015) *Teach Like A Champion: 62 Techniques That Put Students On The Path To College*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco, USA.
- Rosenshine, B. (2012) *Principles of Instruction: Research-Based Strategies That All Teachers Should Know*. American Educator Vol. 36, No. 1, Spring 2012, AFT Strategy 6