

Survey Question

5. This teacher knows when the class understands, and when we do not

Australian Professional Standard

Professional Knowledge Domain

Standard 1: Know students and how they learn

Focus areas:

- 1.2 Understand how students learn
- 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific needs of students across the full range of abilities
- 3.3 Use teaching strategies
- 3.5 Use effective classroom communication
- 5.1 Assess student learning

What does this sound like in the classroom?

"This teacher checks in with me to find out what I'm confident with, and what I still don't understand. Some teachers don't do this regularly, and then I really feel like I'm getting left behind."

Why is this important?

The importance of students actually understanding the lesson is self-evident. There is no point teaching, if the intended recipients understand little or nothing of what is taught. It is, however, easy to presume that new information has been taken on board by a class full of nodding students. This may not be the case and as such further lessons may be compromised as a result. As teachers, we need to check that the information transmitted has been received.

Research evidence strongly supports teachers' use of explicit teaching practices that include:

- Explaining new ideas, and checking that students understand
- Giving time for asking and answering questions
- Evaluating and confirming whether students understand what they are learning before progressing
- Reviewing learning and explaining how it relates to other concepts and skills (NSW DEC, 2014)

Checking for understanding evaluates whether students understand what they have been told before continuing with the lesson (Hattie, 2009). It involves the teacher continually verifying that students are learning what is being taught while it is being taught (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009).

Checking for understanding helps teachers identify learning goals, provide students with feedback and plan instruction based on what the student has

or has not understood (Fisher & Frey, 2014). International testing data shows that practices that involve students explaining the meaning of a text and being asked questions that challenge them to get a better understanding can increase learning significantly (NSW DEC, 2014).

Checking for understanding should occur frequently during a lesson, and involve various tools and strategies. For example, after introducing, explaining and providing examples about a concept, a teacher should check that students understand the concept (Archer, 2011). This involves more than simply asking students if they understand. There are many ways to check for understanding including:

1. Having students generate examples and non-examples
2. Asking questions that require deeper processing about the meaning
3. Asking students to explain ideas in their own words as part of review at the end of a lesson (Archer, 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2014)

What strategies have been shown to work in the classroom?

These guiding questions can help incorporate checking for understanding into lessons (Fisher & Frey, 2014):

- Do I know what misconceptions or naïve assumptions my students possess?
- How do I know what they understand?
- What evidence will I accept for this understanding?
- How will I use their understandings to plan future instruction?

An example approach to check for understanding is TAPPLE (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009):

1. Teach First - explain the concept first
2. Ask a Question - ask specific questions on what you are teaching
3. Pause and Pair-Share - pause after asking a question and before selecting a student to respond to give all students thinking time to prepare an answer. You can also have students discuss the answer in pairs
4. Pick a Non-Volunteer - randomly select three or more non-volunteers to answer check for understanding questions to assess whether the entire class understands
5. Listen to the Response - is the response correct, partially correct or incorrect? What does this mean for what you will teach next?
6. Effective Feedback - give feedback based on the student's response.

What three things can I try in my classroom tomorrow?

1. Consider and trial any of the new methods of checking understanding outlined above.
2. Ensure that you are checking for understanding throughout the lesson.
3. Allow time at the end of the lesson to review new information and answer final queries or questions.

What opportunities are there for collaboration with my colleagues?

Confer with your departmental colleagues to discern common areas for student misunderstanding in each unit. You could work together to find improved methods for delivering tricky concepts, or even consider team-teaching to have an extra teacher in the class to roam and answer questions during these lessons.

Where can I find out more?

Video

- Strategies for checking for understanding
- Best practices for teaching and learning: Checking for understanding

Referenced articles, books and other great reads

- Archer, A. and Hughes, C. (2011) Explicit Instruction. Guildford Publications, USA.
- Dataworks Educational Research (2014) TAPPLE Method of Checking for Understanding. Accessed April 2014
- Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2014) Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom. 2nd edition. ASCD.
- Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2014) Why check for understanding? ASCD. Accessed April 2015.
- Hattie, J. (2009) Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement. Routledge.
- Hollingsworth, J. & Ybarra, S. (2009) Explicit Direct Instruction: The Power of the Well-Crafted, Well-Taught Lesson. Corwin Press.
- NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC), What Works Best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance