

3 Simple Ways To Check For Understanding

September 22, 2018 by Michael Linsin

In observing teachers, one common area of weakness is checking for understanding.

Not every teacher, of course. But many.

And this is a *big* issue.

Because if you send students off to work independently, and they don't know exactly what to do and how to do it, then . . .

- Hands will go up around the room.
- You'll have to reteach individual students.
- Learning will suffer.
- [Boredom](#) will take hold.

It also leads to learned helplessness, poor listening, and a growing separation of ability levels.

Often, the most I hear from teachers is "Are there any questions?"

Which just doesn't cut it.

So what are the best ways to check for understanding? Well, there are many good ones, but today we're going to cover three of simplest, which are low-tech, take very little time, and can be used together.

They're also sure to make you a more effective teacher.

1. Whiteboards

Small whiteboards, one per student, are worth their weight in gold. You can use them to ask your students to prove they understand virtually anything.

You just ask a question or provide a problem, have them jot down an answer (or a question mark if they don't have one), and then hold them up at your signal.

It's also fun. I allow students to add smiley faces, sketches, sayings, messages to me, or anything they like.

Whiteboards give you all the information you need to decide whether to begin independent work right away or continue teaching.

2. Thumbs up/Thumbs down

This is probably the most common checking-for-understanding strategy I see, but it still does the job. It's so, so simple and fast. It's also flexible in that it can be used in many different ways.

The way it works is that you ask a straight yes or no question . . .

"Is this the correct answer?"

"Is this the topic sentence?"

"Are you 100% ready to begin your work?"

. . . then, while shielding with one hand, and keeping the other close to their chest, your students show either a thumbs up or thumbs down.

As long as you explain the purpose of the strategy, and model precisely how to do it, you shouldn't have any problems with wandering eyes.

3. Negative Questions

The third and final strategy is best used as a final check before turning your students loose. It's an effective way to support **shifting responsibility** from you and your instruction to them and their task, assignment, etc.

The way it works is that you'll ask them not if they understand, but if they don't understand.

*"Is there anyone who **doesn't** know exactly what to do when I give my 'go' signal?"*

This puts the onus on them, makes them responsible to speak up, and leaves them with no excuse not to do the work. The result is that you'll get many more clarifying questions – which is what good students do.

I like to follow the question with *"I want to know now. I don't want to find out you're confused or don't know what to do once we've started."*

Again, this supports and encourages independence. It empowers students to advocate for themselves and take control of their own learning.

Faster Growth

The three simple ways to check for understanding allow you to release your students to attack their work without hesitation or uncertainty.

They keep you from having to interrupt by kneeling down to help one student after another. They bring silence, instill true independence, and trigger the highly pleasurable flow state, where students get lost in their work.

The result is faster growth and academic improvement.

This shift in responsibility, however, underscores the importance of providing excellent instruction so that your classroom becomes a place of clearly defined roles.

Where your students know their job and know it well.

And you know yours.