

Strategies to Check for Understanding (CFU)

Checking for understanding, often referred to as CFU, is a principle of instruction that should be planned to occur throughout lessons. Questions should be targeted to check the level of understanding of the content being taught. Asking questions such as “Do you understand?” will often lead to lots of head nods for the teacher, who will then continue on to reach the end of the lesson, only to find out that most of the class did not fully understand.

Several **strategies** can be used to check for understanding at varying levels of depth. If the check for understanding results in garnering incorrect responses, teaching should be modified or differentiated to improve understanding and retention of information.

The strategies outlined below should be employed **after** content has first been taught or instruction has been delivered.

Verbal responses

Choral response – Ask the question and then pause and signal for ‘*everybody*’ to respond at the same time. It is important that you allow processing time for those students who need it and avoid letting one or two ‘quick’ students fire off their answer before the group. If you hear some incorrect or vague responses, you can cold-call on several students to ascertain the issues.

Select a random non-volunteer (cold call) - Use this method to ensure random sampling of the class when asking questions. There are several ways that this can be achieved:

- ▶ Having a class set of paddle-pop sticks in a container, with each student’s name written on a stick. Pose your question to the whole group, select the stick and request that student respond to the question.
- ▶ Random name generator etc. available via smartboard or app

‘No Opt Out’ – This is where you set up the expectation that all students are accountable. No student is ‘let off the hook’ and allowed to rely on other students to put their hands up and answer questions. Students are not given the option of passing or saying, “I don’t know”. Instead the teacher either probes or rephrases the question (possibly asking other students and providing an example for the student who was unsure). The simple act of returning to students after their peers have given an answer encourages a culture of high achievement and that they verbalise what has been said, giving them a better understanding of what is being discussed. Remember, if you call on other students and they also do not know the answer, it is best to reteach prior to moving on.

Pass – You may however wish to allow students to ‘pass’ on a question. Remind the student that they will receive the question again after a few other students have responded to the same question.

Phone a Friend – When a student is having difficulty responding, you can offer the opportunity to ‘phone a friend’. Essentially the student selects one of their peers and must ‘phone’ them and ask the question using a full sentence. The friend responds with the answer and the ‘call’ is ended. The student is then asked the same question and they must repeat/rephrase the answer supplied by their ‘friend’. This allows the student to hear a correct response but also alerts the teacher that the student is not firm on the concept.

Pose, Pause, Pounce Bounce – This technique is when you pose a question, pause for 3-5 seconds (or even longer if deemed appropriate), pounce on a student to answer (Cold Call) and then bounce their response to another student (Can you go further? Do you agree/disagree?).

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You can keep this going and have several students respond to each other's answers. It maintains engagement of all students to listen to the first student response, as they may be called to respond to this so need to attend.

Probing or Process Questions – This is where you get students to clarify their thinking and allows the teacher to ascertain how well students are understanding the content. Questions need to be structured to ensure students elaborate on their response. These six levels of questioning are considered important:

1. Getting students to **clarify** their thinking: Why do you say that? What do you already know about that? Could you explain further?
2. Challenging and **probing** students about assumptions: Is this always the case? Do you agree or disagree with this (and why)?
3. Demanding **evidence**: Why do you say that? Can you give me an example of that? How do you know this?
4. Looking at alternative viewpoints and perspectives: What is the counter argument for...? What are the advantages/disadvantages of this?
5. Exploring **implications** and consequences: But if X happened, what else would result? How does X affect Y?
6. Questioning the **question**: Why do you think I asked that question? Why was that question important?

Say it again, say it better - If you simply ask a student to repeat what they said but better they are able then to re-form their initial response into well-structured and impactful sentences. Asking them to use a 'complete sentence' answer, provides you with a more detailed response (than yes or no), and allows you to check for any misconceptions or gaps in the learning.

Think-Pair-Share - Teach students the protocol for Think, Pair, Share exercises. Listen to students' answers as they share with their partners. Circulate and listen to pairs dialogue/discussions to ascertain level of understanding. Then use cold call to sample pairs' responses. You may also request pairs to share particularly good responses to reinforce the concept with the class.

Wait Time – Ensure you build in time for the student to process the question and formulate a response. Pose your question, select the student to respond and then count in your head 3-5 seconds after calling on the student. This time may be longer for students who require longer processing time such as students for whom English is an additional language or dialect.

Whip Around - The 'whip around' allows teachers to check for understanding in a group setting. While the whip around may not provide individual, student-level information about understanding, it is useful in helping teachers to determine if they need to reteach content to the group. First, the teacher poses a question or a task; typically, students are asked to make a list of at least three items. Students then individually respond on a mini whiteboard or scrap piece of paper. When they have done so, students stand up. The teacher then randomly calls on a student to share one of the responses from their list. Students must pay attention and listen closely to their classmates' responses to compare them to their own and check off any items that are said by another student. When all of each students' responses have been shared with the group, whether or not they were the one to share them, the student sits down. The teacher continues to call on students until they are all seated. As the teacher listens to the information shared by students, they can determine if there is a general level of understanding or if there are gaps in students' thinking.

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Actions or demonstrations

Four corners - Set up four corners of an area with a different response, such as “Agree,” “Disagree,” “In the middle,” “Not sure,” and so on. Read a statement, and have the students run to the corner that matches their opinion. Select different students to justify their choices. This is great for getting them up and moving if they’ve been stationary for a long time. Randomly select students to provide their reasoning as to why they selected that response.

Hand Signals - Hand signals can be used to rate or indicate students’ understanding of content. This can be as simple as asking for a thumbs up or thumbs down to an agree or disagree question or selecting an answer when given a multiple choice i.e. “Is the answer 1, 2, 3 or 4?” Upon teacher signal, students show their answer by holding up the number of fingers that equates to their choice of answer. You can also have students point to the response (i.e. left or right) to examples on the LH and RH sides of a board. This strategy requires engagement by all students and allows the teacher to check for understanding within a large group.

Response cards - Students are provided with cards to display in response to a question. Examples include T or F for true or false; Y or N for Yes or No; A, B, C or D; Which is the odd one out to correspond with a multiple choice answer. Ensure you call upon a student intermittently to explain why they selected that particular response.

Student Response Systems/Clickers/Digital polls - If the tools are available, poll students through digital programs (i.e., Poll Everywhere, Kahoot, or Socrative). Invite students to defend their answers and explain their thinking. Plickers is an alternative digital method to students having to use a device.

Written responses

Mini whiteboards - Provide students with small whiteboards, a marker and wiper. Periodically ask questions that require a short, written response, have them write an answer on their board and display their response when prompted. Call on students to explain their reasoning for their response. You can also use whiteboard for multiple choice responses where the student writes the selection on the board and display.

Quick write - Invite students to write a short paragraph on a given prompt.