

checking for understanding fisher and frey

The effectiveness of any educational intervention hinges on the ability of educators to gauge student comprehension. In the realm of instructional best practices, the work of Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey has significantly influenced how teachers actively monitor learning. This article delves into the core principles and practical applications of checking for understanding as championed by Fisher and Frey, offering a comprehensive guide for educators seeking to elevate their assessment strategies. We will explore the foundational beliefs behind their approach, various techniques for formative assessment, and how these methods directly impact student engagement and academic growth. Understanding how to effectively check for understanding is paramount for tailoring instruction and ensuring all students are progressing towards mastery.

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Understanding the Core of Checking for Understanding by Fisher and Frey

In modern educational discourse, the concept of "checking for understanding" has emerged as a cornerstone of effective pedagogy, and the contributions of renowned educators Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey have been instrumental in shaping this understanding. Their work emphasizes that assessment is not merely a summative event but an ongoing, dynamic process woven into the fabric of daily instruction. Fisher and Frey advocate for a proactive approach, where teachers consistently gather information about student learning to inform their subsequent teaching moves. This iterative process of checking for understanding is pivotal for identifying learning gaps, reinforcing correct concepts, and differentiating instruction to meet the diverse needs present in any classroom.

The Fisher and Frey Approach to Checking for Understanding

Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey's philosophy on checking for understanding is deeply rooted in the principles of formative assessment and responsive teaching. They view checking for understanding not as an isolated activity but as an integral part of the teaching and learning cycle. This approach moves beyond traditional, infrequent assessments to embrace continuous, embedded checks that provide real-time feedback. Their framework emphasizes that understanding is not binary; students often demonstrate partial comprehension, and it is the teacher's role to identify these nuances and provide targeted support. The ultimate goal is to ensure that learning is transparent for both the teacher and the student, fostering a collaborative environment focused on academic progress.

The Foundational Principles of Fisher and Frey's Methodology

At the heart of Fisher and Frey's approach are several foundational principles that guide effective checking for understanding. They stress that assessment should be diagnostic, aiming to uncover what students know and what they need to learn next. Furthermore, their work highlights the importance of assessment for learning, meaning the information gathered is used to adjust instruction in the moment. Teachers are encouraged to be agile, readily modifying their lessons based on the evidence of student comprehension they collect. This also involves fostering student ownership of learning, empowering students to understand their own progress and identify areas where they need further support. The emphasis is on building a culture of continuous improvement driven by data, albeit data gathered informally and frequently.

Integrating Formative Assessment into Daily Instruction

Fisher and Frey advocate for the seamless integration of formative assessment strategies into every lesson. This means that checking for understanding is not an add-on but a natural extension of instructional activities. Teachers should be equipped with a repertoire of techniques that can be employed throughout a lesson, from the introduction of new material to the conclusion of a learning segment. This consistent monitoring allows for immediate adjustments to pacing, delivery, and content, ensuring that no student is left behind. The goal is to make the assessment of learning a continuous flow, providing a clear picture of student understanding at every stage.

Why is Checking for Understanding Crucial in the

Classroom?

The significance of robust checking for understanding in the educational landscape cannot be overstated. It serves as the primary mechanism for teachers to gauge the effectiveness of their instruction and for students to receive timely feedback on their learning journey. Without consistent checks, teachers risk proceeding with lessons that may be either too advanced or too simplistic for their students, leading to disengagement and missed learning opportunities. For students, this process illuminates their strengths and areas needing improvement, empowering them to take ownership of their learning and seek the necessary support. It transforms teaching from a monologue into a dynamic dialogue, where instruction is responsive to student needs.

Identifying Learning Gaps and Misconceptions

One of the most critical functions of checking for understanding is its ability to pinpoint learning gaps and misconceptions before they become deeply entrenched. Students often develop misunderstandings that can impede their progress in subsequent learning. By employing frequent and varied checks, teachers can identify these errors early on. This allows for immediate remediation and clarification, preventing the accumulation of knowledge deficits. Fisher and Frey emphasize that uncovering these misconceptions is not about judgment but about providing the precise support needed for students to correct their thinking and build a solid foundation of understanding. This proactive approach saves valuable instructional time and improves overall learning outcomes.

Differentiating Instruction to Meet Diverse Needs

The diverse nature of student learning styles, prior knowledge, and paces necessitates differentiated instruction. Checking for understanding provides the essential data that enables teachers to differentiate effectively. When a teacher knows which students have grasped a concept and which are struggling, they can tailor their subsequent instruction accordingly. This might involve providing additional support or practice for some students, offering extension activities for others, or re-teaching concepts in a different modality. Fisher and Frey's framework underscores that differentiation is not a separate activity but a direct response to the information gathered through consistent checks for understanding. This ensures that all students are challenged appropriately and supported adequately.

Enhancing Student Engagement and Motivation

When students feel that their learning is being actively monitored and responded to, their engagement and motivation often increase. Knowing that their teacher is invested in their understanding fosters a sense of accountability and encourages active participation. Furthermore, when students receive timely feedback that helps them overcome challenges, they experience success, which is a powerful motivator. Fisher and Frey's strategies often

involve interactive checks that require active student participation, making the learning process more dynamic and less passive. This active involvement not only deepens understanding but also cultivates a more positive attitude towards learning itself.

Key Strategies for Checking for Understanding by Fisher and Frey

Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey have identified and popularized a range of effective strategies for teachers to consistently and reliably check for understanding. These methods are designed to be easily implemented, provide immediate feedback, and engage students in the learning process. They move beyond simple 'thumbs up/thumbs down' to more nuanced ways of assessing student thinking and comprehension. The emphasis is on gathering actionable data that informs instructional decisions in real-time, ensuring that teaching is responsive to student needs.

Low-Stakes, High-Impact Questioning Techniques

Questioning is a fundamental tool for checking for understanding, and Fisher and Frey advocate for strategic, low-stakes questioning. This involves asking questions that don't carry a grade but are designed to reveal student thinking. Techniques include:

- **Think-Pair-Share:** Students first think about a question individually, then discuss their thoughts with a partner, and finally share their ideas with the larger group.
- **Wait Time:** Allowing adequate wait time after posing a question gives all students, including those who need more processing time, an opportunity to formulate a response.
- **Targeted Questioning:** Instead of asking a general question to the whole class, teachers can call on specific students or use techniques to call on students randomly to ensure equitable participation.
- **Probing Questions:** Following up on initial responses with questions like "Can you explain further?" or "What makes you say that?" helps to uncover deeper understanding and identify misconceptions.

Utilizing Student Work for Real-Time Assessment

Fisher and Frey emphasize that student work, even in its nascent stages, can be a rich source of information about their understanding. This can include:

- **Exit Tickets:** Short, focused prompts at the end of a lesson that require students to summarize key learning, answer a specific question, or identify something they still find confusing.
- **Quick Writes:** Brief writing tasks that allow students to express their understanding of a concept in their own words.
- **Graphic Organizers:** Having students fill out graphic organizers during or after a lesson can reveal how they are making connections between ideas.
- **Annotating Texts:** Observing how students annotate texts can show their level of comprehension and critical engagement with the material.

Observational Techniques and Non-Verbal Cues

Teachers can glean significant insights into student understanding by carefully observing their behavior and non-verbal cues. This aspect of checking for understanding is often overlooked but is incredibly powerful.

- **Observation of Student Work:** Simply walking around the classroom and observing students as they work on tasks can reveal who is struggling, who is engaged, and who has a clear grasp of the material.
- **Listening to Student Conversations:** Eavesdropping on small group discussions can provide authentic insights into student thinking and collaboration.
- **Facial Expressions and Body Language:** While not always definitive, a student's facial expressions (e.g., confusion, concentration, or understanding) and body language can offer clues about their cognitive state.
- **Checking for Completion and Effort:** Observing the effort students are putting into tasks and the completeness of their work can also be indicators of engagement and understanding.

Leveraging Technology for Immediate Feedback

In today's digitally enhanced classrooms, technology offers powerful tools for checking for understanding. Fisher and Frey encourage the strategic use of these tools to gather immediate data.

- **Online Polling and Quiz Tools:** Platforms like Kahoot!, Quizizz, or Nearpod allow teachers to create interactive quizzes and polls that provide instant feedback on student responses.

- **Digital Whiteboards and Collaborative Tools:** Tools that allow multiple students to contribute to a shared digital space can reveal collective understanding and individual contributions.
- **Learning Management System (LMS) Features:** Many LMS platforms have built-in tools for quick checks, assignments, and discussion forums that facilitate formative assessment.
- **Interactive Presentations:** Using presentation software with embedded questions or polls can break up lectures and allow for frequent checks of comprehension.

Implementing Fisher and Frey's Checking for Understanding Techniques

Successfully integrating Fisher and Frey's strategies for checking for understanding requires intentional planning and a commitment to making assessment a regular part of the teaching and learning process. It's not enough to know the strategies; teachers must be adept at applying them effectively in diverse classroom contexts. This involves careful preparation, consistent practice, and a willingness to adapt based on the feedback received from students.

Planning for Checks for Understanding

Effective implementation begins with thoughtful planning. Teachers should consider where and how they will embed checks for understanding within their lesson plans. This involves identifying critical junctures in the lesson where assessing comprehension is most crucial. For instance, after introducing a new concept, before moving on to a complex problem, or before transitioning to a new activity. Planning should also include selecting appropriate strategies based on the learning objective and the type of understanding being assessed. It's also important to anticipate potential student misconceptions and plan questions or tasks that can uncover them.

Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment for Assessment

A classroom culture that values learning and encourages risk-taking is essential for effective checking for understanding. Students need to feel safe to express their current level of understanding without fear of judgment or negative consequences. Teachers can foster this environment by:

- **Emphasizing learning over grading for these checks.**

- **Normalizing mistakes as learning opportunities.**
- **Providing positive reinforcement for participation and effort.**
- **Clearly communicating the purpose of each assessment task.**

When students trust their teacher and their peers, they are more likely to engage honestly in the process of checking for understanding.

Analyzing and Responding to Student Data

The most crucial step after checking for understanding is to analyze the data gathered and respond to it in a meaningful way. Fisher and Frey stress that assessment without action is futile. Teachers must:

- **Review responses quickly.**
- **Identify patterns of understanding and misunderstanding.**
- **Make immediate adjustments to instruction** (e.g., re-teaching, providing additional examples, or moving forward if mastery is evident).
- **Provide specific, actionable feedback to students**, guiding them on how to improve.

This responsive teaching ensures that the checking for understanding process directly contributes to student learning and instructional effectiveness.

Benefits of Effective Checking for Understanding

The consistent and skillful application of checking for understanding techniques, as championed by Fisher and Frey, yields a multitude of benefits for both students and educators. These advantages extend beyond mere academic achievement to encompass the development of essential learning skills and a more positive educational experience.

Improved Academic Performance and Mastery

Perhaps the most significant benefit is the direct impact on student academic performance. By identifying and addressing learning gaps in real-time, teachers ensure that students build a solid understanding of foundational concepts. This prevents the cumulative effect of misunderstandings that can hinder progress in more complex topics. As students receive targeted support and are guided towards mastery, their overall academic performance

naturally improves.

Enhanced Student Ownership of Learning

When students are actively involved in the process of checking for understanding, whether by responding to questions, completing quick checks, or self-assessing their work, they develop a greater sense of ownership over their learning. They become more aware of what they know and what they need to work on, empowering them to take a more active role in their education. This fosters independence and self-regulation, crucial skills for lifelong learning.

Increased Teacher Effectiveness and Instructional Agility

For teachers, effectively checking for understanding transforms their practice. It provides them with immediate, actionable data that allows them to be more responsive and agile in their teaching. They can adapt lessons on the fly, re-teach when necessary, or accelerate learning for students who have grasped concepts quickly. This leads to more efficient and effective use of instructional time, as teaching is directly aligned with student needs.

Development of Metacognitive Skills

Many of Fisher and Frey's strategies encourage students to reflect on their own thinking and learning processes. This helps them develop metacognitive skills – the ability to think about their thinking. By understanding how they learn best and identifying when they are confused, students become more strategic learners, better equipped to tackle future academic challenges independently.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid When Checking for Understanding

While the principles of checking for understanding are clear, teachers can sometimes fall into common traps that diminish the effectiveness of these crucial assessment practices. Awareness of these pitfalls can help educators refine their approach and ensure they are maximizing the benefits of formative assessment.

Over-reliance on a Single Strategy

One common mistake is to rely too heavily on one or two methods of checking for understanding, such as only using oral questioning or only using exit tickets. This can lead to a narrow view of student comprehension. Fisher and Frey advocate for a variety of strategies to capture a more holistic picture of student learning. Variety ensures that different learning styles and strengths are accounted for.

Insufficient Wait Time

Not allowing adequate wait time after asking a question is a significant error. Students need time to process information, formulate their thoughts, and articulate their responses. Rushing this process can lead to a false impression of understanding or a lack of participation from students who need a little more time.

Vague or Leading Questions

The effectiveness of questioning is highly dependent on the quality of the questions asked. Vague questions that allow for easy guessing or leading questions that suggest the desired answer do not provide genuine insight into student understanding. Questions should be clear, specific, and open-ended enough to elicit detailed responses.

Ignoring or Misinterpreting Data

Gathering data through checks for understanding is only valuable if it is analyzed and acted upon. Teachers must resist the temptation to simply collect responses without a plan for using the information. Equally important is the accurate interpretation of the data; sometimes, a student's response might appear correct on the surface but indicate a deeper misconception.

Not Providing Actionable Feedback

Simply knowing that a student is struggling is not enough. The feedback provided must be actionable, meaning it guides the student on what specific steps they can take to improve. Generic feedback like "good job" or "try harder" is less effective than feedback that points out specific errors or suggests strategies for correction.

Conclusion: Mastering Checking for Understanding with Fisher and Frey

In conclusion, the work of Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey offers a profound and practical

framework for educators seeking to enhance their understanding of student learning through consistent and effective checking for understanding. Their emphasis on formative assessment, responsive teaching, and a diverse toolkit of strategies empowers teachers to create dynamic learning environments where student comprehension is continuously monitored and supported. By embracing their principles and implementing their recommended techniques, educators can effectively identify learning gaps, differentiate instruction, boost student engagement, and ultimately improve academic outcomes for all learners. Mastering checking for understanding is not just a pedagogical skill; it is the cornerstone of effective teaching that leads to deeper, more meaningful student learning.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core principle behind Fisher and Frey's approach to checking for understanding?

The core principle is that checking for understanding isn't a one-time event, but an ongoing, integrated process throughout the lesson. It emphasizes gathering timely and actionable information to inform instruction.

What are some common misconceptions about checking for understanding that Fisher and Frey address?

Common misconceptions include thinking it's just about asking questions, relying solely on hand-raising, or only checking at the end of a lesson. They emphasize it's about multiple methods and frequent checks.

What are the benefits of implementing Fisher and Frey's strategies for checking for understanding?

Benefits include increased student engagement, improved learning outcomes by identifying and addressing misunderstandings early, more effective and responsive teaching, and a clearer picture of student mastery.

What is the role of 'wait time' in Fisher and Frey's checking for understanding framework?

Wait time is crucial. It's the pause after asking a question or giving an instruction, allowing all students to process the information and formulate a response, thereby increasing participation and the quality of answers.

How does Fisher and Frey's approach differ from traditional methods of assessment?

It shifts from summative assessments to formative ones. Traditional methods often occur at the end, while Fisher and Frey's approach emphasizes frequent, low-stakes checks during

instruction to guide learning in real-time.

What are some practical strategies Fisher and Frey suggest for checking for understanding?

They advocate for a variety of strategies like think-pair-share, exit tickets, quick checks (e.g., thumbs up/down, fist to five), whiteboard responses, and asking students to explain concepts in their own words.

How can teachers use the information gathered from checking for understanding to adjust their instruction?

Teachers should use this data to immediately reteach, provide targeted interventions for struggling students, offer enrichment for those who have mastered the concept, or move forward with confidence if understanding is widespread.

What is the importance of 'student-generated responses' in the context of Fisher and Frey's ideas?

Student-generated responses, such as having students explain their thinking or create their own examples, are vital because they reveal deeper understanding and identify misconceptions that might not surface through simple recall questions.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to checking for understanding, drawing inspiration from the work of Fisher and Frey and their focus on effective instruction and student engagement:

1. Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning

This foundational text by John Hattie, whose work strongly aligns with Fisher and Frey's emphasis on evidence-based practices, explores the impact of various teaching strategies on student achievement. It provides a comprehensive overview of what works in education, including the importance of feedback and monitoring student progress – key elements of checking for understanding. The book offers practical insights for educators to translate research into classroom action.

2. The Teacher Clarity Playbook: A Guide to the Essential Elements of Teaching

Authored by John Hattie and facilitators from Visible Learning, this book delves into the critical components of effective teaching, with a significant focus on making learning intentions and success criteria clear to students. This clarity is a prerequisite for students to be able to demonstrate their understanding. It offers actionable steps for teachers to ensure students know what they are supposed to learn and how they will know they have learned it.

3. Response to Intervention: A Complete Guide to Reading and Writing

While not solely by Fisher and Frey, this book (often featuring contributions from researchers in the field) addresses the systematic assessment of student learning and the

provision of tiered support. Checking for understanding is central to RTI, as it informs the level of intervention a student requires. It provides practical strategies for identifying students who need additional support and tailoring instruction accordingly.

4. The Classroom Management Book

By Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong, this influential book underscores the importance of proactive classroom management for maximizing instructional time. While not directly about checking for understanding, a well-managed classroom where students are actively engaged and on-task is crucial for opportunities to check for understanding. It emphasizes establishing routines and procedures that facilitate learning and minimize disruptions, creating an environment conducive to assessment.

5. The Formative Assessment Action Plan: Practical Steps to Improve Teaching and Learning

This book by Carolyn S. Cahoon and Heidi K. Sipple provides educators with a structured approach to implementing formative assessment practices effectively. Formative assessment is intrinsically linked to checking for understanding, as it involves ongoing monitoring to inform instruction. It offers practical strategies and tools for teachers to gather real-time data on student learning and adjust their teaching accordingly.

6. Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College

Doug Lemov's popular book outlines practical techniques for effective teaching, many of which directly support or facilitate the process of checking for understanding. Techniques like "cold call" and "show me" are explicit methods for gauging comprehension. The book provides actionable strategies for increasing student engagement and accountability, which in turn provides more opportunities for teachers to assess learning.

7. Uncovering Student Thinking: How to Tell What They Really Know

This book by Saundra Yancy McGuire emphasizes the importance of getting inside students' heads to understand their thought processes and identify misconceptions. This aligns perfectly with the goals of checking for understanding, aiming to move beyond surface-level responses. It provides a variety of strategies for revealing students' genuine understanding and addressing any gaps or errors in their thinking.

8. Differentiation in Action: A Practical Guide for Ensuring Learning for All Students

While focusing on differentiation, this book (often with authors like Carol Ann Tomlinson) implicitly highlights the need for teachers to understand individual student learning needs, which is achieved through constant checking for understanding. It provides strategies for tailoring instruction to meet diverse learning styles and abilities. By assessing what students know and don't know, teachers can effectively differentiate their teaching.

9. Making Sense of Math: How to Engage Students and Help Them Understand

This book by Pepe Medina and Dana J. Stuchul focuses on making mathematical concepts accessible and understandable to students. A key component of this is the teacher's ability to check for understanding in mathematics, identifying where students are struggling. It offers practical approaches and examples for promoting deeper conceptual understanding in math, with an emphasis on how to monitor that understanding.

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