

Six Facets of Understanding

Having understanding means “a student has something more than just textbook knowledge and skill—that a student really gets it. [It] involves sophisticated insights and abilities, reflected in varied performances and contexts. We also suggest that different kinds of understandings exist, that knowledge and skill do not automatically lead to understanding, that misunderstanding is a bigger problem than we realize, and that assessment of understanding therefore requires evidence that cannot be gained from traditional testing alone” (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p. 5).

A Student Who Really Understands Can

<p>Facet 1. Explain</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide complex, insightful, and credible reasons—theories and principles based on good evidence and argument—to explain or illuminate an event, fact, text or idea; provide a systematic account, using helpful and vivid mental models; make fine, subtle distinctions; aptly qualify opinions; see and argue for what is central—the big ideas, pivotal moments, decisive evidence, key questions, etc.; make good predictions. • Avoid or overcome common misunderstandings and superficial or simplistic views—shown, for example, by avoiding overly simplistic, hackneyed, or imprecise theories or explanations. • Reveal a personalized, thoughtful and coherent grasp of the subject—indicated by developing a reflective and systematic integration of knowledge. This integration would therefore be based in part upon significant and apt direct or simulated experience of specific ideas or feelings. • Substantiate or justify views with sound argument and evidence.
<p>Facet 2. Interpret</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively and sensitively interpret texts, language, and situations—shown by the ability to “read between the lines” and offer plausible accounts of the many possible purposes and meanings of any “text” (e.g., book, situation, or human behavior). • Offer a meaningful and illuminating account of complex situations and people; provide historical and biographical background, thereby helping to make ideas more accessible and relevant.
<p>Facet 3. Apply</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ knowledge effectively in diverse, authentic, and realistically messy contexts. • Extend or apply knowledge in a novel and effective way—that is, invent in the sense of innovate, as Piaget (1973) discusses in <i>To Understand Is to Invent</i>. • Effectively self-adjust as she performs.
<p>Facet 4. See in Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critique and justify a position to see it as a point of view; use skills and dispositions that embody disciplined skepticism and the testing of theories. • Know the history of an idea to place discussion and theory in context; know the questions or problem to which the knowledge or theory studied is an answer or solution. • Infer the assumptions upon which an idea or theory is based. • Know the limits as well as the power of an idea. • See through argument or language that is biased, partisan, or ideological. • See and explain the importance or worth of an idea. • Wisely employ both criticism and belief, an ability summarized by Peter Elbow’s (1973) maxim that we are likely to better understand when we methodically “believe when others doubt and doubt when others believe.”