

What are Opportunities to Respond and Why Should You be Using Them?

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Defining OTRs

When I first heard the term “opportunity to respond (OTR),” it sounded technical, and I wasn’t exactly sure what it meant. As it turns out, there is a significant body of research indicating that when teachers engage students by giving them frequent opportunities to respond, all kinds of wonderful things happen. Dr. Terry Scott, Director of the Center for Instructional and Behavioral Research in Schools, notes that different types of OTRs have three things in common: first, they are delivered by the teacher, second, they are focused on the curriculum, and third, they ask students to think and do!

10,00 Data Sets from Classrooms in Kentucky

For the last 5 years, I’ve had the privilege of working with Dr. Terry Scott, and I’ve been impressed by the fact that he has collected over 10,000 data sets from observations in 6,730 elementary classrooms, 1,544 middle school classrooms, and 1,983 high school classrooms across the state of Kentucky. This data was collected by a team of highly trained coders who collect data on both group and individual OTRs including verbal responses, choral responses, use of response cards, manipulatives and gestures, and peer discussion. Classrooms are coded for 15-minute time periods when teachers are delivering content, and then a report is generated with easy-to-understand graphs showing overall OTR rates as well as group and individual OTR rates and shared with teachers. After analyzing this large data set, Dr. Scott and his colleagues have drawn several major conclusions.

3 Major Findings:

Finding #1

One major finding is that OTRs delivered at a rate of at least 3 per minute are associated with significantly higher rates of student active engagement and lower rates of student disruption (Gage et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2003). When I first heard that OTRs should be delivered at a rate of 3 per minute I was skeptical that this rate could be achieved by most teachers. However, it is important to remember that OTR rates are calculated by dividing the number of opportunities to respond over a 15-minute instructional period, and during those 15 minutes teachers sometimes ask lots of rapid-fire questions followed by several minutes of talking. In other words, the number of OTRs per minute is averaged over 15-minutes, and it IS possible to achieve a rate of 3 per minute if teachers are consistently offering students different ways to engage with the content.

Finding #2

The use of OTRS in the school is associated with positive outcomes for both academics and behavior. In one study comparing high and low reading achievement across high poverty schools, the only significant difference across schools with high and low performance was the rate of OTR, with students in high performing schools on average receiving more than 260 additional OTRs per week

(Hirn, Hollo, & Scott, 2017). While OTRs provide students with academic engagement, they also predict successful student responses, thereby providing teachers with opportunities to provide higher rates of positive feedback. Recent research has identified both OTR and positive reinforcement as being associated with lower rates of suspension at the school level (Scott & Gage, 2020).

Finding #3

The combination of OTR and positive feedback is associated with an increase in the percentage of students at the proficient and distinguished levels in both reading and mathematics (Scott & Gage, 2020). There were similar increases observed at both the middle and high school; the results fell just short of statistical significance. The combination of OTR and positive feedback seems logical and obvious. The more opportunities students have to respond, the more opportunities teachers have to provide feedback. One key point here is that instruction needs to be designed well so that students experience success and teachers can, in turn, provide lots of positive feedback. I don't know about you, but when I learned SIM strategies, I believe I became a better teacher because I learned how to design and teach a lesson well. SIM Learning Strategies are designed so that students experience success early and have frequent opportunities to respond.

Different Types of OTRs

So, how can you add more OTRs to your teaching and presenting repertoire? I was surprised to learn from Dr. Scott that OTRs don't have to be elaborate or involve higher order questioning to be effective. You just need to engage your students (or audience) MORE! Consider adding any of these strategies to your routine.

Verbal Engagement Strategies

Whip Around. For this strategy the teacher asks a question that has many possible answers and then rapidly moves up and down rows calling on students to provide an answer. For example, the teacher could ask students to name a president, a multiple of 3, or a verb. This is a great warm-up or review activity.

Choral Response. One major benefit of choral responding is that every student is answering a question rather than only one, and students can practice simultaneously until the correct answer is "firm." In choral responding, the teacher asks a question, allows thinking time, and then signals students to respond together. Choral responses are easy to incorporate into any lesson, and they should be used with older students as well as younger students. Watch this [brief video](#) to see high school math teacher using choral response.

Quick Poll. In this strategy the teacher poses a question with many possible answers and gives students 3-4 minutes to think of an answer. After time has expired, the teacher randomly asks 3 or 4 students to provide their answers and writes those responses on the white board. Next, the teacher reads each answer aloud, asks students with the same answer to raise their hand, and records votes for each answer on the board. After all responses are recorded, the teacher facilitates a whole-group discussion about the responses.

Non-Verbal Engagement Strategies

Stop and Jot. The Stop and Jot Strategy (or Think and Write Strategy) can be used after long periods of talk and allows students to synthesize their learning. This strategy helps break up a lecture by having students respond in writing to teacher prompts. These prompts could include having students summarize information, ask comprehension questions, apply information, or share their thoughts and opinions on a topic.

Response Cards. Response cards are small cards held by students that allows them to respond in several ways. These could include colored choice cards, multiple choice cards true/false, or white boards. When signaled, students hold up their response to a question posed by a teacher. Watch this [brief video](#) to see different teachers using response cards in a variety of ways.

Hand Signals. Hand signals allow students to use their hands to respond in nonverbal ways. Students can use a thumbs-up or thumbs-down to agree or disagree with a statement. Teachers could also use a Fist-to-Five scale with a fist representing zero and all fingers representing 5. You could ask students, “On a scale of 0-5, show me how well you understand ratios.” Or you could say, “Using your fist-to-five, show me if you need a break.” Watch this [brief video](#) to see a teacher using hand signals during vocabulary instruction.

Partner and Team Engagement Strategies

Turn and Talk. In this strategy, students turn to a partner and discuss a question posed by the teacher. For example, “Turn to your elbow partner and talk about how you solved this problem.” This is a simple strategy to add to any lesson, and it is often under-utilized. In this [brief video](#) Gwen Berry asks students to turn and talk with a partner while learning to create mnemonic devices.

Cued Retell. In cued retell, students pair up, and one student is the coach while the other student is the learner. The coach’s job is to “cue” the learner with answers, reinforce, and prompt to ensure that the content is learned. Students then switch roles. This strategy requires a bit of preparation to ensure that the coach has a cued retell sheet that lists correct answers.

Four Corners. The four-corners strategy involves asking students to move to a corner of the classroom that best represents their answer. Once in their corner, students discuss their answer with other students, and the teacher randomly selects a student to summarize their ideas to the class. You may recognize this strategy as a Kagan Strategy; Kagan strategies are an excellent way to increase student engagement! Watch this [brief video](#) to see the Four Corners Strategy in action.

Video Resources

For additional information on opportunities to respond, check out these videos on our [CIBRS website](#)

Researcher Spotlight (Dr. Gwen Berry interviewing Dr. Terry Scott)	Engagement Strategies	More Engagement Strategies
• Part 1: Strategies for Maximizing Student Success	• The Benefits of Opportunities to Respond	• Nonverbal Engagement Strategies Part 2
• Part 2: Why Focus on Opportunities to Respond	• Verbal Engagement Strategies	• Partner & Team Engagement Strategies Part 1
• Part 3: Major Findings on Engagement	• Nonverbal Engagement Strategies Part 1	• Partner & Team Engagement Strategies Part 2
• Part 4: How do OTRs Affect Culture and Climate		

Another Excellent Resource on OTRs:

- [National Center on Intensive Intervention: Effective Methods to Elicit Frequent Responses](#)

Conclusion and Application to SIM

So, what steps can you take to apply this knowledge?

First, plan to use more OTRs when you provide professional learning for any Learning Strategy or Content Enhancement Routine. Does a particular type of OTR work well for the strategy or routine you are teaching? For example, would guided notes work well to engage your audience, or could you embed several “Stop and Jots” to ensure that learners have truly understood the content? Another idea is to create multiple sets of response cards and use them for the Verbal Rehearsal portion of any learning strategy. An important takeaway here is to be sure and PLAN when, where, and how you will use OTRs. Consider the content, the context, and your audience and match the OTR to the situation. Our experience with teachers reminds us that if you don’t plan to use OTRs, you won’t use them!

Second, consider adding one or two slides to your SIM (or other) presentations about the importance of engagement. In short, we know from the research cited above that when teachers use more OTRs problem behaviors decrease and academic proficiency and engagement increases. Also, more OTRs are associated with fewer suspensions.

Third, when coaching teachers, provide specific examples of how using OTRs could produce positive outcomes. For example, show teachers how to use OTRs to facilitate the co-construction of any Content Enhancement Routine or how to use OTRs to involve students in the describe and model portions of Learning Strategy instruction.

Finally, remember that OTRs are easy to use, have powerful benefits, and teachers at all grade levels aren't using them enough! If you're like me, you're probably not using them enough either! I encourage you to use MORE opportunities to respond in your professional learning and coaching; the outcome will be a more engaged audience with increased understanding!

References

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