

Building Scaffolds for Learning

Think about a building that is undergoing structural repair. If the construction disturbs any significant part of the building, such that it needs to be replaced, construction workers put up a scaffold to help hold up a ceiling or otherwise support the building while a beam is being repaired or replaced. As soon as the new beam is fully installed and is now holding up the ceiling itself, the scaffold can be taken away. The scaffold is just a temporary structure that supports the permanent structure of the building.

Scaffolding has slightly different meanings in the educational world. When the guide for teachers uses the term *scaffolding*, it will be referring to “Scaffolding as Careful Building,” as described below unless otherwise indicated.

Scaffolds as Temporary Learning Supports

Teachers who may have never heard of the use of educational scaffolding, practice it frequently. They introduce a concept, deepen it by engaging the students in a skill, and when the students “get it,” they ask them to express the concept or use the skill independently. Let’s look at these steps more closely.

At first the teacher provides everything the students need to understand the concept being taught and so supports the students in the learning process (like a building scaffold). After the concept has been taught, the teacher asks the students to work independently, practicing the skill or perhaps applying the concept in another context (starting to remove some of the scaffold). Class work and homework are a way for the teacher to see if anyone needs some more scaffolding to feel comfortable with the knowledge.

For example, in unit 2 of *The Bible*, the teacher can introduce or reinforce the way people navigate the Bible. She or he will provide scaffolding by explaining the process verbally, providing a handout, and finding some cites with the class. When the teacher believes all of the students have a basic understanding of the process, she or he asks them to find citations on their own. From then on the students will be able to find biblical passages using the method. If they are unsure, they still possess the scaffold of the handout to refer to.

When students work in groups, they often provide some scaffolding for one another so that the teacher spends less time on the scaffolding himself or herself. Students may approach a problem or an issue that they might not be able to solve on their own, but with the strengths of each student contributing to the process, the group can move toward independent learning by teaching one another.

Scaffolding as Careful Building

Students benefit from learning increasingly complex concepts in stages. In this approach to scaffolding, less attention is paid to the temporary support provided by the teacher and more to the foundation and stages of building a solid structure. To combine these two interpretations of scaffolding together, the teacher provides learning stages that build on one another to create deeper and broader understanding of the concept. Students advance in their learning by building on earlier and more foundational understandings. For example, students cannot navigate the Bible if they do not know anything about it. Presenting overall material about the Bible is necessary scaffolding before asking students to navigate the Bible. Once students know how to navigate the Bible, they have the necessary understanding to learn how to begin to compare the stories in one biblical book with those in other biblical books.



Scaffolding as Bridging Gaps

This term was coined as a metaphor for describing the temporary supports (in the forms of questions, cues, and prompts) a teacher offers a learner to help him or her bridge toward a skill or concept he or she cannot do or understand independently. (D. Wood with J. S. Bruner, J. S. and G. Ross, "The Role of Tutoring and Problem Solving," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17, pages 89–100.)

This understanding of educational scaffolding requires that teachers read students' clues and cues so that they can formulate questions that will help their students to understand what they are struggling with. When teachers become aware of misunderstanding, they can envision different reasons that the students might not understand and then can try to provide the students with a helpful question or suggestion that allows the students to look more closely at the concept, or possibly give some information (but not all) so that the students can clear up their misunderstanding on their own.

Several Types of Scaffolding

Despite their slight difference in focus, all three approaches to educational scaffolding help the learner to move to the next level of understanding through the support of the teacher. All require some detective work to figure out what students understand so as to know how to assist them and then to identify the missing links in their learning process.

Bibliography

Fisher, Douglas, and Nancy Frey. *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching: A Framework for the Gradual Release of Responsibility*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008.

