

6 Scaffolding Strategies to Use with Your Students



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What's the opposite of scaffolding a lesson? It would be saying to students something like, "Read this nine-page science article, write a detailed essay on the topic it explores, and turn it in by Wednesday." Yikes -- no safety net, no parachute, no scaffolding -- just left blowing in the wind.

Let's start by agreeing that scaffolding a lesson and differentiating instruction are two different things. Scaffolding is breaking up the learning into chunks and then providing a tool, or structure, with each chunk. When scaffolding reading, for example, you might preview the text and discuss key vocabulary, or chunk the text and read and discuss as you go. With differentiation, you may give a child an entirely different piece of text to read, you might shorten the text or alter it, and you may modify the writing assignment that follows.

Simply put, scaffolding is what you do first with kids, then for those students who are still struggling, you may need to differentiate by modifying an assignment and/or making accommodations for a student (for example, choose more accessible text and/or assign an alternative project).

Scaffolding and differentiation do have something in common though. In order to meet students where they are and appropriately scaffold a lesson, or differentiate instruction, you have to know the individual and collective zone of proximal development (ZPD) of your learners. (As education researcher Eileen Raymond states, "[T]he ZPD is the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance.")

So let's get to some scaffolding strategies you may or may not have tried yet, or perhaps you've not used them in sometime and just need a gentle reminder on how awesome and helpful they can be when it comes to student learning:

1. Show and Tell

How many of us say that we learn best by seeing something rather than hearing about it? Modeling for students is a cornerstone of scaffolding in my experience. Have you ever interrupted someone with "just show me!" while they were in the middle of explaining to you how to do something? Every chance you have, show or demonstrate to students exactly what they are expected to do.

- Try the [fish bowl activity](#), where a small group in the center are circled by the class as the group in the middle, or fishbowl, engage in an activity, modeling how it's done for the larger group.
- Always show students the outcome or product *before* they do it. If a teacher assigns a persuasive essay or inquiry-based science project, a model should be presented side-by-side with a criteria chart or rubric. You can guide students through each step of the process, model in-hand of the finished product.
- Use [think alouds](#), which will allow you to model your thought process as you: read a

text, solve a problem, or design a project. Remember that children's cognitive abilities are still in development so opportunities for them to see developed, critical thinking are essential.

2. Tap into Prior Knowledge

Ask students to share their own experiences, hunches, and ideas about the content or concept of study and have them relate and connect it to their own lives. Sometimes you may have to offer hints and suggestions, leading them to the connections a bit, but once they get there, they will grasp it as their own.

Launching the learning in your classroom from the prior knowledge of your students, and using this as a framework for future lessons is not only a scaffolding technique, many would agree it's just plain good teaching.

3. Give Time to Talk

All learners need time to process new ideas and information. They also need time to verbally make sense of and articulate their learning with the community of learners who are also engaged in the same experience and journey. As we all know, structured discussions really work best with children regardless of their level of maturation. If you aren't weaving in [think-pair-share](#), turn-and-talk, triad teams or some other structured talking time throughout the lesson, you should begin including this crucial strategy on a regular basis.

4. Pre-Teach Vocabulary

Sometimes referred to as frontloading vocabulary, this is a strategy that we teachers don't use enough. Many of us, myself included, are guilty of sending students all alone down the bumpy, muddy path known as Challenging Text - a road booby trapped with difficult vocabulary. We send them ill prepared and then we are often shocked when they: a) lose interest b) create a ruckus c) fall asleep.

Pre-teaching vocabulary doesn't mean pulling a dozen words from the chapter and having kids look up definitions and write them out (we all know how this will go. Again, see above a, b, and c). Instead, introduce the words to kids in photos, and in context to things they know and are interested in. Use analogies, metaphors and invite students to create a symbol or drawing for each word and give time for discussion of the words (small and whole groups). Not until they've done all this should the dictionaries come out. And the dictionaries will be used only to compare with those definitions they've already discovered on their own.

With the dozen or so words "frontloaded," students are ready, you as their guide, to tackle that challenging text.

5. Use Visual Aids

Graphic organizers, pictures, and charts can all serve as scaffolding tools. Graphic organizers are very specific in that they help kids visually represent their ideas, organize information, and grasp concepts such as sequencing and cause and effect.

A graphic organizer shouldn't be The Product, but rather it's a scaffolding tool that helps guide and shape the student's thinking so that they can apply it. Some students can dive right into the discussion, or writing an essay, or synthesizing several different hypotheses without using a graphic organizer of some sort, but many of our students benefit from using them with a difficult reading or challenging new information. Think of graphic organizers as training wheels; they are temporary and meant to be removed.

6. Pause, Ask Questions, Pause, Review

This is a wonderful way to check for understanding while students read a chunk of difficult text or learn a new concept or content. Here's how this strategy works: a new idea from discussion or the reading is shared, then pause (providing think time), then ask a strategic question, pausing again. By strategic, you need to design them ahead of time, make sure they are specific, guiding and open-ended questions. (Great questions

fail without giving think time for responses so hold out during that Uncomfortable Silence.) Keep kids engaged as active listeners by calling on someone to "give the gist" of what was just discussed / discovered / questioned. If the class seems stuck by the questions, provide an opportunity for students to discuss it with a neighbor.

Trying Something New

With all the diverse learners in our classrooms, there is a strong need for teachers to learn and experiment with new scaffolding strategies. I often say to teachers I support, you have slow down in order to go quickly. Scaffolding a lesson may, in fact, take longer to teach, but the end product is of far greater quality and the experience much more rewarding for all involved.

Please share with us scaffolding strategies that work well for your students.

This blogpost has been updated. It originally ran on 5/24/11.