

Designing Scaffolded Assignments

Scaffolded Assignments Defined

Scaffolding learning involves breaking complicated concepts down into smaller, manageable parts that gradually increase in complexity and providing support for students as they work through the assignment sequence.

The practice of scaffolding is supported by learning theory developed by Lev Vygotsky, founder of the school of cultural-historical psychology. Briefly, Vygotsky termed the mental region between what students already know and what they do not yet know at all the “zone of proximal development.” He demonstrated that student learning is most powerful when the work students are asked to do in and outside of class is designed to call them to this zone and is offered with structured support for learning.

Getting Started

To begin to build scaffolded assignment in a series, consider the prerequisite knowledge and skills required to complete the final or culminating task well. Design in-class discussions and mini-assignments to provide opportunities for students to strengthen, develop, and practice using their prior knowledge and skills as well as developing new knowledge and skills to build toward the crafting of a culminating assignment. As you design assignments that build on one another, map the relationship of each to the culminating assignment. Craft learning goals for each chunk that you can make available to students. They, too, should be able to see the relationship of each smaller task to the whole in service of accumulating meta-knowledge as they proceed through the sequence of assignments.

For Example: The Critical Essay

In order to write a five page critical essay students will need to understand the base text. You might build mini-assignments and in-class activities that help students learn to analyze a text for meaning and significance. You might ask students to gloss the text, identifying key terms and ideas, noting their meanings and significance to the text as a whole. You might ask students to paraphrase a key moment or concept in the text. You might ask students to summarize the key conclusions. In class, you might ask students to compare their work, discussing similarities and differences between their interpretations of the base text and describing to each other what textual clues they used to arrive at those interpretations.

You might provide students with models for the kind of critical essay you hope they will learn to write themselves. Spend time in class helping them not only to understand what that model says, but also how it is structured—its essential elements and key critical terms. Ask them to identify the primary thesis or predicative claims in the model. Ask them to draft one or more statements about their own base text that assert a relationship between two or more of its elements and that make a critical or interpretive claim. Give students class time to debate their statements, identifying the strengths and arguable points of those

statements with their classmates and exploring how each might lead readers to expect or require certain kinds of pursuant claims and supports in order to be convinced or to arrive with the writer at a desired conclusion.

Give students opportunities to draft and workshop their essays, to receive feedback in class from their peers, and, either in writing or in individual conferences, from you. Ask them to use that feedback to revise their essays. Take some time in class to teach students to recognize the difference between summative (this is good/bad) feedback and formative feedback that helps writers recognize how their drafts are working, where they are not working, and why for the purposes of revision.

Grading Scaffolded Assignments

There is no single way to go about grading scaffolded assignments. You may choose to offer a final grade for the collection of assignments, with each element constituting a certain percentage of that final grade. If you offer students not one, but several moderately sized series of scaffolded assignments, you might ask students to collect their work into a final course portfolio, assigning each scaffolded series of assignments a percentage of the portfolio grade and each element of each series a weight within the percentage value of that series. You might choose to grade each element separately. Be sure that you attach grade weights to scaffolded elements that reflect without over determining the complexity of each successive task. You might choose to include some ungraded informal assignments as part of your scaffolding. Be sure you address these through class discussion, in workshops, or through the provision of feedback so that students understand their value and usefulness to the process of producing a completed larger assignment. Students will want to know how well their work is measuring up as they move from task to task. You might choose to offer students “ghost grades” or provisional grades with feedback, giving them opportunities to revise prior to submission for a final grade.

As you grade, return to the learning outcomes you have established for the course as a whole as well as to the learning goals you have articulated for each scaffolded element. Use those outcomes and goals as measures of the quality of each student’s work. If you are grading by criteria that fall outside of those articulated outcomes and goals, be sure you have spelled those out for students in your assignment description. Err on the side of being too explicit rather than what you might think of as “commonsense.”

Time Management for Feedback and Grading

Generally speaking, students are unlikely to use (or arguably to even read) extensive feedback offered at the time of final grading. Frontload your labour in producing feedback to student writing so that you are providing formative feedback during the time students are actually composing and revising their essays.

Tailor your formative feedback to the stage of the composing process where students actually are. For example, don’t spend significant amounts of time correcting sentence level errors on essays that are likely to be significantly revised. Such errors may, in fact, be more an affect of students working out ideas than a symptom of lack of grammatical knowledge. Focus your most significant feedback on what students are saying, on the structure of their

arguments, on the warrants underlying their claims and on the quality, integrity, and organization of claims and supports. Peers may offer formative feedback during in-class workshops. You may choose to meet individually with students for short conferences and provide oral feedback as a substitute for written feedback at one stage during the composing process. Individual conferences can help you and your students build effective learning relationships, provide opportunities for give and take dialogues rather than top-down, mastery-based feedback, and can give students who learn better through talking than reading teacher comments access to usable forms of feedback more directly tailored to their individual learning needs.

Explain to your students in class why copyediting prior to publication or submission for grading is critical to their success as writers and teach them how to do it. When you do comment on sentence level errors, notice that typically a single student will make one or two errors over and over. Note those errors where they first occur. Explain why they are errors and how to correct them at that first point of occurrence. Give a model of a corrected version of the sentence where the error first occurs. In following occurrences, simply mark the error and refer to your previous note rather than explaining or correcting the same error-type repeatedly. Don't, in other words, copyedit student papers as part of either your formative or summative feedback delivery.

At the point of final grading, focus your summative feedback on what students did well and those aspects of their writing craft on which they should continue to work. Use the language of your established learning goals for the assignment to provide summative feedback that connects the grade you assign to the course learning outcomes.