

2ND EDITION

Better Learning

Through Structured Teaching

A Framework
for the
Gradual Release
of Responsibility

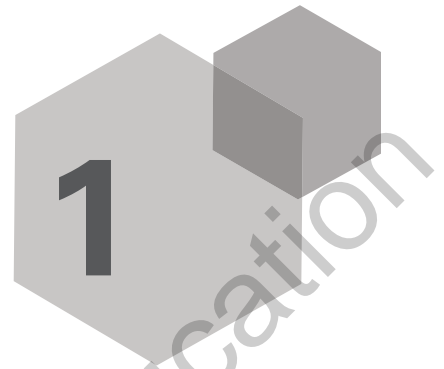
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Learning, or Not Learning, in School

Learning—the goal of schooling—is a complex process. But what *is* learning? Consider the following definitions and the implications each has for teaching:

- Learning is the process of acquiring knowledge or skill through study, experience, or teaching.
- Learning is experience that brings about a relatively permanent change in behavior.
- Learning is a change in neural function as a consequence of experience.
- Learning is the cognitive process of acquiring skill or knowledge.
- Learning is an increase in the amount of response rules and concepts in the memory of an intelligent system.

Which definition fits with your beliefs? Now ask yourself, how is it that *you* learn? Think of something that you do well. Take a minute to analyze this skill or behavior. How did you develop your prowess? How did you move from novice to expert? You probably

did not develop a high level of skill from simply being told how to complete a task. Instead, you likely had models, feedback, peer support, and lots of practice. Over time, you developed your expertise. You may have extended that expertise further by sharing it with others. The model that explains this type of learning process is called *the gradual release of responsibility instructional framework*.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility Instructional Framework

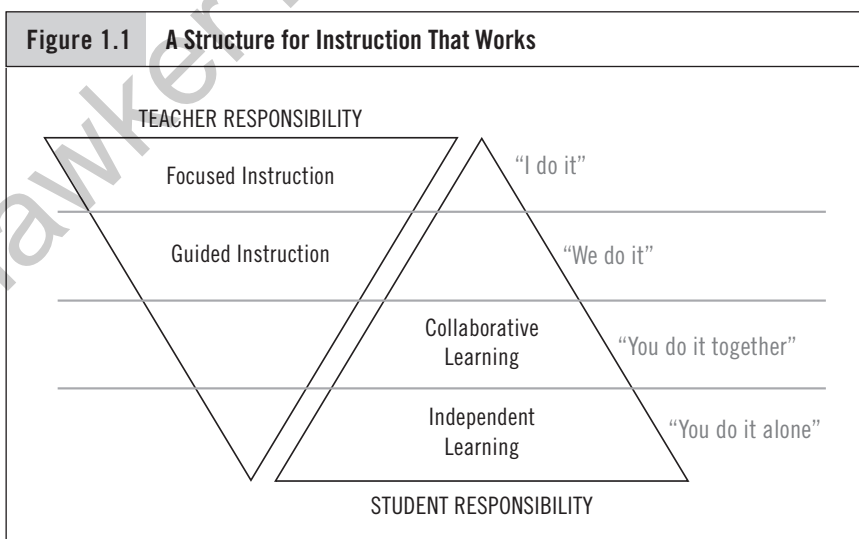
The gradual release of responsibility instructional framework purposefully shifts the cognitive load from teacher-as-model, to joint responsibility of teacher and learner, to independent practice and application by the learner (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). It stipulates that the teacher moves from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task . . . to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211). This gradual release may occur over a day, a week, a month, or a year. Graves and Fitzgerald (2003) note that “effective instruction often follows a progression in which teachers gradually do less of the work and students gradually assume increased responsibility for their learning. It is through this process of gradually assuming more and more responsibility for their learning that students become competent, independent learners” (p. 98).

The gradual release of responsibility framework, originally developed for reading instruction, reflects the intersection of several theories, including

- Piaget’s (1952) work on cognitive structures and schemata
- Vygotsky’s (1962, 1978) work on zones of proximal development
- Bandura’s (1965) work on attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation
- Wood, Bruner, and Ross’s (1976) work on scaffolded instruction

Taken together, these theories suggest that learning occurs through interactions with others; when these interactions are intentional, specific learning occurs.

Unfortunately, most current efforts to implement the gradual release of responsibility framework limit these interactions to adult and child exchanges: *I do it; we do it together; you do it*. But this three-phase model omits a truly vital component: students learning through collaboration with their peers—the *you do it together* phase. Although the effectiveness of peer learning has been demonstrated with English language learners (Zhang & Dougherty Stahl, 2011), students with disabilities (Grenier, Dyson, & Yeaton, 2005), and learners identified as gifted (Patrick, Bangel, & Jeon, 2005), it has typically been examined as a singular practice, isolated from the overall instructional design of the lesson. A more complete implementation model for the gradual release of responsibility recognizes the recursive nature of learning and has teachers cycle purposefully through purpose setting and guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent experiences. In Figure 1.1, we map out these phases of learning, indicating the share of responsibility that students and teachers have in each.



We are not suggesting that every lesson must always start with focused instruction (goal setting and modeling) before progressing to guided instruction, then to collaborative learning, and finally to independent tasks (Grant, Lapp, Fisher, Johnson, & Frey, 2012). Teachers often reorder the phases—for example, begin a lesson with an independent task, such as bellwork or a quick-write, or engage students in collaborative peer inquiry prior to providing teacher modeling. As we stress throughout this book, what is important and necessary for deep learning is that students experience all four phases of learning when encountering new content. We will explore these phases in greater detail in subsequent chapters, but let's proceed now with an overview of each.

Focused Instruction

Focused instruction is an important part of the overall lesson design. This phase includes establishing a clear lesson purpose. We use the word *purpose* rather than *goal*, *objective*, or *learning target* because it's essential to ensure that students grasp the relevance of the lesson. The statement of a lesson's purpose can address goals related to content, language, and social aspects. Consider, for example, the teacher who clearly communicates the purpose of a lesson as follows:

Our content goal today is to multiply and estimate products of fractions and mixed numerals because these are used in cooking, construction, and medicine. Our language goal for today is to use precise mathematical terminology while discussing problems and answers with one another. Our social goal today is to improve our turn-taking skills by making sure that each member of the group has a chance to participate in the discussion.

As Dick, Carey, and Carey (2001) remind us, an “instructional goal is (1) a clear, general statement of learner outcomes,

(2) related to an identified problem and needs assessment, and (3) achievable through instruction” (p. 25). These are important considerations when establishing lesson purpose. As we will discuss further in Chapter 2, it’s not enough to simply state the lesson purpose. We must ensure that students have opportunities to engage with the purpose in a meaningful way and obtain feedback about their performance.

In addition to establishing purpose, the focused instruction phase of learning provides students with information about the ways in which a skilled reader, writer, or thinker processes the information under discussion. Typically, this is done through direct explanations, modeling, or think-alouds in which the teacher demonstrates the kind of thinking required to solve a problem, understand a set of directions, or interact with a text. For example, after reading aloud a passage about spiders to 3rd graders, a teacher might say:

Now I have even more questions. I just read that spiders don’t have mouth parts, so I’m wondering how they eat. I can’t really visualize that, and I will definitely have to look for more information to answer that question. I didn’t know that spiders are found all over the world—that was interesting to find out. To me, the most interesting spider mentioned in this text is the one that lives underwater in silken domes. Now, that is something I need to know more about.

Focused instruction is typically done with the whole class and usually lasts 15 minutes or less—long enough to clearly establish purpose and ensure that students have a model from which to work. Note that focused instruction does not have to come at the beginning of the lesson, nor is there any reason to limit focused instruction to once per lesson. The gradual release of responsibility instructional framework is recursive, and a teacher might reassume responsibility several times during a