THE CONSTRUCTION ZONE

BUILDING SCAFFOLDS FOR READERS AND WRITERS

TERRY THOMPSON
Foreword by Donalyn Miller

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CHAPTER 1

SCAFFOLDING: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU

One of the most interesting parts about writing this book has been watching everyone's reactions when I tell them what it's about. Usually it goes something like this:

"Scaffolding?"
"Yes."
"Hmm."

When that happens, I'm never quite sure what people are thinking during the brief silence that usually follows. But after they recover, a few graciously reply with something along the lines of "Oh, how exciting!" or "I look forward to reading it" before changing the subject completely. Still, some braver souls hazard a guess, following up with "Oh. You mean like . . ." and filling in the blank with their own take on scaffolding. When they do, everyone seems to have a different idea of what scaffolding is.

Even so, ask just about any teacher if he or she scaffolds learning and most will likely say they do. Probe a little more deeply, though, and we might start to diverge on the finer details of our understandings of the scaffolding process. Some may sincerely answer that they thought they did, but now that you ask, they aren't so sure. It seems that when most of us are pressed for

clear details around the concept, things start to go in a confusing labyrinth of different directions.

Though many of us understand scaffolding as a way to support learning, our attempts to go deeper often leave us pensive. Faces scrunched up. Lips pursed. Convinced we do in fact know what it is, but struggling to word it concisely. And if we're having a hard time defining it, imagine how difficult it might be to have professional conversations around it—let alone actually do it. Despite these complexities, *scaffolding* remains one of those perennial terms that has wound its way seamlessly into our collective psyche.

Part of what makes scaffolding so tough to pin down is that it's essentially based in a metaphor—the idea of supporting students as they build independence—and metaphors leave lots of room for interpretation. On one hand, this versatility is helpful because it allows us to tailor the image in a variety of ways to fit our needs and growing understanding of the process. But these same benefits can also have the opposite effect, making scaffolding difficult to puzzle out definitively.

It makes sense, then, that teachers might have varying ideas of what scaffolding is.

With that in mind, this book aims to explore scaffolding by honoring its broad complexities while starting small. Together, we'll explore this multifaceted concept from a specific angle where scaffolded instruction characterizes a pattern of teaching that shifts the level of responsibility for the learning from the *more knowing other* (you!) to the *less knowing other* (your student). We'll expand on that idea as we work from a common definition that centers on five fundamental factors:

1. a ***more knowing other*** supporting

2. a ***novice*** in reaching

3. some sort of educational ***outcome*** the learner could not yet reach alone

4. in a ***constructive*** way

5. that is ***temporary***, steadily fading as the novice gets closer to (and eventually reaches) the intended outcome.

These factors seem straightforward at first, but when you take a moment to consider them more deeply, you'll soon arrive at the thought that there's got to be a whole lot more to it. For a more expansive view, we'll need to move

beyond this basic description and look at the principles that form the bedrock of scaffolding.

LEARNING HOW WE LEARN: THE RESEARCH BEHIND SCAFFOLDING

The way we learn is a very intricate, personal experience. Thankfully, students come to us each school year with an innate ability and desire to learn.

JEAN PIAGET: CONSTRUCTION OF UNDERSTANDING

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget taught us that our students are hardwired—as all humans are—to take in new information and experiences and incorporate them into their constantly evolving schemas. His theory of learning holds that, much like a pre-K student who independently figures out her iPad camera function, children gain knowledge through increasingly complex mental activities and interactions with their environment. To put it another way, children *construct* their own understandings as they take on new knowledge, adding to what they already know by trial and error, keeping what works and tossing out what doesn't, until they arrive at an entirely new level of understanding. Piaget's theory, also known as **constructivism**, reminds us that, whether we're teaching them or not, children are in a constant state of active learning. In essence, the students in our classrooms aren't sitting by passively, waiting for us. They are *active* participants in the learning process (Mercer and Hodgkinson 2008; Ginsberg and Opper 1988).

But humans are also social animals. Along with that instinctive drive to learn is an equally powerful need to establish and build relationships with others. We need to interact with others in a meaningful way—others who empower us in our evolution to become more than we were before. Others who help us grow spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually.

This is where you come in.

LEV VYGOTSKY: THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist working around the same time as Piaget, would argue that you're one of these "others"—an integral part of a delicate learning process along with millions of others just like you. In fact, you're what Vygotsky might call a *more knowing other*.

Central to Vygotsky's theory is the idea that, through social interactions with this more knowledgeable person, learners are able to progress from what they are able to understand alone to knowledge that is just beyond their grasp. In this way, the construction of knowledge is a *social* endeavor—so we refer to Vygotsky's work as **social constructivism** (Mercer and Hodgkinson 2008). Vygotsky called the space between the learner's current level of achievement and that next level of knowledge she can't accomplish alone the **zone of proximal development (ZPD)**. Vygotsky (1978) believed that through interactive conversations, the more knowing other guides the child through a series of learning experiences that continually unfurl as the zone of proximal development expands with each successive experience (see Figure 1.1). In effect, our instruction is most successful when we're teaching in that just-right place that rests squarely between what students can already do and what they can't do alone. When you reflect on your own teaching, you'll probably notice that outside of this zone, instruction falters and loses its way.

For instance, if we continually teach what our children already control (the zone of *actual* development), we've made the learning too easy and run the risk of losing them to boredom. If, on the other hand, the majority of our instruction occurs in areas they aren't quite ready for (the zone of *potential* development), we've made the learning too difficult and could easily lose them to frustration and resistance. When we work in the zone of proximal development, opportunities are ripe to support our students in just the right way—challenging, helping, and adjusting to higher or lower levels of support while guiding them across the zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky (1986) upped the ante on Piaget's thinking with the idea that, although children are certainly active participants in the construction of knowledge, a more knowing other facilitates this learning through social interactions and conversation. In this *construction zone* of sorts, the teacher and student are essentially constructing knowledge together. In fact, it is in this concept of a more knowing other supporting a learner through the zone of proximal development that scaffolding finds its structure.

JEROME BRUNER: SCAFFOLDING

American psychologist Jerome Bruner and his colleagues first introduced us to the metaphor of *scaffolding* as a useful way to conceptualize what Vygotsky meant by the zone of proximal development (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976). Here, in much the same way as a physical scaffold supports a builder until he is able to complete his work, scaffolding is the path a teacher charts to guide
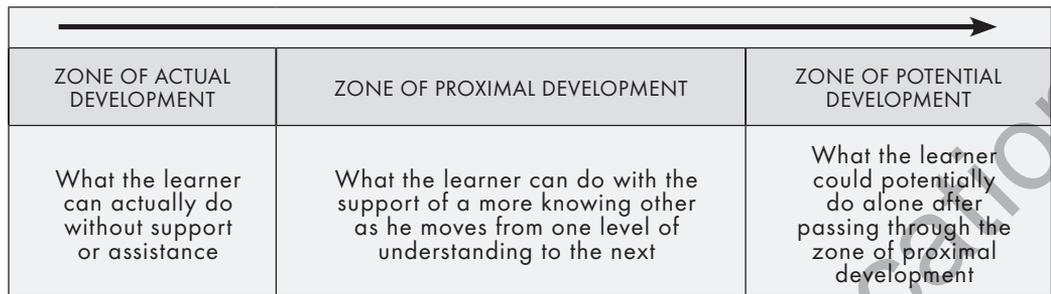
ZONE OF ACTUAL DEVELOPMENT	ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT	ZONE OF POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT
What the learner can actually do without support or assistance	What the learner can do with the support of a more knowing other as he moves from one level of understanding to the next	What the learner could potentially do alone after passing through the zone of proximal development

Figure 1.1
Diagram of the Zone of Proximal Development

learners from point A, the zone of *actual* development, to point B, the zone of *potential* development (see Figure 1.2).

Instructional scaffolding, then, is a thoughtful course through Vygotsky's zone of proximal development that includes a series of actionable steps, decisions, and interactions that support the learner in growing toward increasing degrees of independence. It differentiates itself from other ways learning might occur, because students are actively involved in a rich, interactive experience that invites them to construct new learning with a teacher who supports them every step of the way, offering just enough assistance while allowing them to take on greater stages of independence the instant they're ready.
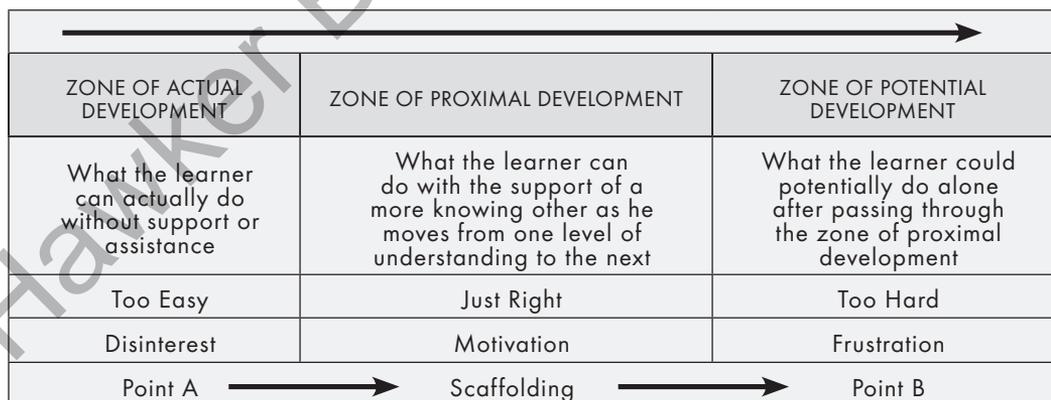
ZONE OF ACTUAL DEVELOPMENT	ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT	ZONE OF POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT
What the learner can actually do without support or assistance	What the learner can do with the support of a more knowing other as he moves from one level of understanding to the next	What the learner could potentially do alone after passing through the zone of proximal development
Too Easy	Just Right	Too Hard
Disinterest	Motivation	Frustration
Point A ⟶	Scaffolding ⟶	Point B

Figure 1.2
Expanded Diagram of Zone of Proximal Development

This marriage of thinking from prominent scholars such as Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner helps us understand the philosophical groundings of scaffolding, but up to this point, the concept might still seem too theoretical and elusive, giving rise to still more questions. For instance, how exactly do we do that? How do we clearly plot courses across the zone of proximal development every day in real classrooms? How do we release learners to increasing degrees of independence? And, what would that even look like?

PEARSON AND GALLAGHER: THE GRADUAL RELEASE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Pearson and Gallagher (1983) offered solutions to these questions in a framework known as the gradual release of responsibility model. As a way to operationalize Vygotsky and Bruner's work, the gradual release of responsibility model gives us a user-friendly structure for how, over time, the teacher moves from a highly supportive role to that of a less involved participant as the learner increasingly takes on greater responsibility for the work. Currently one of the best-known modes of instruction, the gradual release progression is most recognized in its three stages of successful instruction (see Figure 1.3) that shift from modeling to guided practice to independence:

- *Modeling:* (I do) where the teacher models while explaining the goal for the learner

- *Guided Practice:* (We do) where the teacher works with the student, gradually pulling back the level of support as the student gains independence

- *Independence:* (You do) where the teacher pulls back completely and the student works independently

For example, when my friend Iris decided it would be fun to teach me how to knit, she first talked me through the process—"Loop, around, pull off, tighten"—while I watched her do it (*modeling*). After several minutes of my just watching, she put the needles into my hands and then reached over and put her hands right on top of mine. As she guided my hands with hers, she continued to repeat, "Loop, around, pull off, tighten" (*guided practice*). Eventually, she pulled her hands away, continuing to chant, "Loop, around, pull off, tighten," jumping back in when I lost my way (*guided practice*). Before long, she just

sat back and watched me as I took over, repeating to myself while knitting, "Loop, around, pull off, tighten" (*independence*).

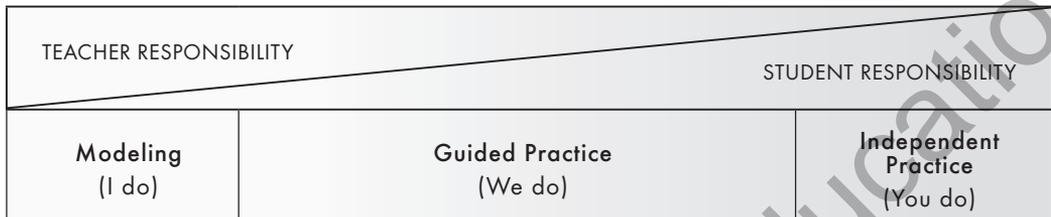| TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY		STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY
Modeling (I do)	Guided Practice (We do)	Independent Practice (You do)

Figure 1.3
Common Interpretation of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

This three-stage structure of the gradual release of responsibility model shapes the skeleton of a variety of similar learning frameworks (see Figure 1.4), so it's probably sounding familiar to you. How you label the stages of the gradual release pattern seems to be a matter of personal (and sometimes, philosophical) preference, but because it so clearly exemplifies how a more knowing other might bring a learner through the zone of proximal development, the gradual release of responsibility model has become, for many teachers, synonymous with scaffolding.

Is the classic diagram in Figure 1.3 too simplistic? Probably. But keep in mind, it was never meant to encompass all that scaffolding is or can be. Rather, it was meant to give us a basic grasp of scaffolding. For a more
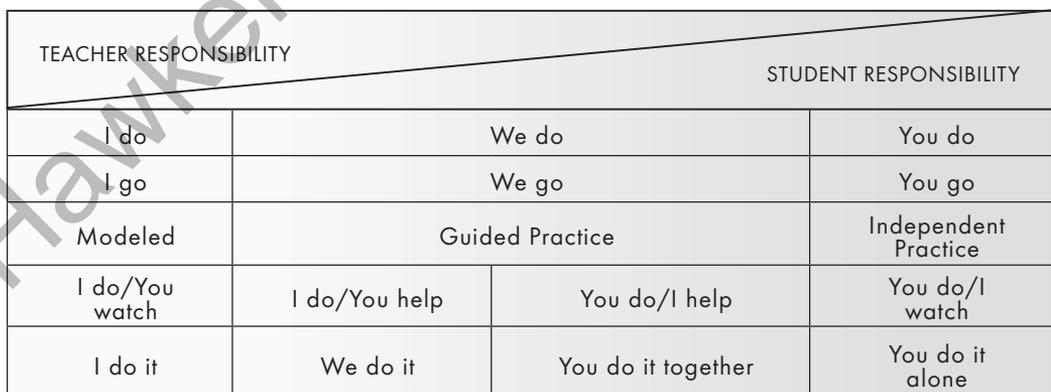
TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY			STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY
I do	We do		You do
I go	We go		You go
Modeled	Guided Practice		Independent Practice
I do/You watch	I do/You help	You do/I help	You do/I watch
I do it	We do it	You do it together	You do it alone

Figure 1.4
Variations of the Gradual Release Model

detailed understanding, we have to look more closely at what goes on inside this innocent little rectangle.

SCAFFOLDING: FOUR COMMON CONDITIONS

Beyond its basic diagram, scaffolding is an incredibly complicated process that would take volumes of books to explore definitively, and certainly no one diagram could ever make scaffolding easy. There are as many routes to independence as there are children in our classrooms, and no book could tell you everything you need to know about instructional scaffolding or what to do in every situation with every student and every goal. With this in mind, remember that this book isn't aiming for a global, comprehensive analysis of scaffolding. For instance, we're not going to discuss symmetrical scaffolding, in which collaborative groups scaffold themselves to independence, nor will we cover other supportive processes such as whole-to-part learning and invitational learning that are just as effective. Since scaffolding can manifest itself in a variety of ways, we'll keep things manageable by concentrating our attention solely on those scaffolding structures in the traditional educational setting that involve the teacher as the more knowing other supporting learners in that just-right zone of proximal development.

We'll further fine-tune our focus by considering the role we play in this process while directing our lens at four common conditions that apply to any scaffolding scenario, regardless of group size, educational setting, content area, instructional goal, delivery method, how it's characterized, or even the learners involved. These four common conditions are *focus*, *flexibility*, *feedback,* and *responsibility*.

1. **Focus**: Based in recursive and ongoing assessment paired with an understanding of the learner, we are proactive, teaching toward a clear, deliberate goal.

2. **Flexibility**: Tethered to our focus, our scaffolds have a responsive, organic quality and shift with perfect timing to meet the specific needs of our learners.

3. **Feedback**: Strong scaffolds exist and expand in an ongoing feedback loop that emphasizes and builds on students' thinking so they can monitor how they're doing and take the next, right steps toward independence.