Scaffolding Student Learning

Scaffolding student learning means developing opportunities for students to move progressively toward mastery of skills, deeper **performances of understanding**, and greater capacity to independently transfer learning to other contexts. The term denotes the structures of support you develop—the activities, assignments, and opportunities—that strategically and cumulatively advance student learning.

When scaffolding, start with a "backward plan":

- First identify the skills or product you're expecting students ultimately to master.
- Ask yourself, "In order to master this, what will students need to know and be able to do?" Then begin to sequence that (likely long) list from least to most demanding. You may find Bloom's Taxonomy helpful in ordering the discrete skills and moves that advance to the final learning outcome(s).
- Finally, develop opportunities for students to practice those skills iteratively, with increasing complexity and synthesis. Often, this will require **low-stakes assignments**, including **Writing, Speaking and Reading to Learn assignments**. Scaffolding offers the instructor an opportunity to measure student progress and provide **formative feedback**, though importantly, you don't have to respond to (or even read) all the work produced in scaffolded sequences.

Examples of scaffolding activities

- **In-class writing.** Students can be given a specific objective to complete, matched to the skill they're currently developing.
- **Project proposals.** Students can prepare for a final project by describing their plans, hypothesis, and research questions. This is also a good time to ensure their understanding of the assignment and its purpose.
- **Model text analysis.** Students can analyze model texts, examine the moves they're making, and practice making those moves themselves.
- **Annotated bibliographies.** Students can document their research as it progresses and practice summarizing, paraphrasing, and analyzing sources.
- **Drafts.** Students can develop particular skills if given opportunities to draft and revise using meaningful formative feedback, either from a peer or their instructor.
- **Explicit skills instruction.** When students need support on a particular skill, you can dedicate class time to its development (e.g., thesis statements; complex, multi-stage computation; applying a theoretical framework to a specific case).

References

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

University of Michigan Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing. "Sequencing and Scaffolding Assignments." Digital.

See also

Establishing Learning Goals
Formative and Summative Feedback
High-stakes and Low-stakes Assignments
In-class Writing

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