

# Deconstructing “Scaffolding”

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## Deconstructing “Scaffolding”

By Alfie Kohn

It was the late Jerome Bruner and his colleagues who first thought to invoke the field of (building) construction in creating an educational metaphor. They described the process of providing learners with temporary support for what they can't yet do on their own as “scaffolding.”<sup>1</sup> It's a nifty figure of speech, and the practice itself seems just as appealing. After all, who could object to offering students a boost until they no longer need it?

But as I've thought more carefully about scaffolding – and watched as it, like so many other promising terms, has been appropriated by non- and even anti-progressive educators – I've become increasingly skeptical. Here are some questions I think we might want to ask when the word is casually tossed around.

**1. What's the hurry?** Often the point of scaffolding is not to provide support just because it's needed but as a strategy for expediting improvement in academic performance. When this is done with young children in particular, might it represent another example of rushing kids along? (“Well, okay, I'll help you with the big words, but I expect you to be able to read this on your own by the end of the month.”) Could scaffolding with this goal in mind displace the sort of exploration that's driven purely by curiosity?

**2. Must self-sufficiency always be the goal?** It's immensely rewarding to watch kids grow and become increasingly adept at what they're doing. But we often take for granted the desirability of getting them to do more and more on their own. (By definition, scaffolding isn't meant to stay up indefinitely.) From a psychological perspective, autonomy – experiencing a sense of volition and being able to act on one's preferences – is not the same thing as independence. Some very healthy, autonomous young people aren't particularly independent, and some who are independent really can't be described as autonomous.

From a cultural perspective, meanwhile, independence is closely connected to an individualistic worldview that is far from universal. It's more commonly endorsed by men than by women, and it's more common in the West than the East, in industrialized than nonindustrialized societies, and among professionals as compared with working-class people. For many people, *interdependence* is valued at least as much as independence – which means that engaging in tasks together, continuing to rely on one another, might be something to be celebrated rather than outgrown.<sup>2</sup>

**3. What's the task?** Gay Ivey, a literacy educator, observes that scaffolding is sometimes provided in order to “get students through difficult, unappealing texts.” Even if it works to elicit their compliance, she adds, it's unlikely to “motivate students to continue learning about that topic on their own.”<sup>3</sup> The broader implication is that a preoccupation with the degree of difficulty – and how best to provide scaffolding – serves to distract us from the far more important question of what we're asking students to do. Just because a task meets the Goldilocks test with respect to challenge level – neither too easy nor too hard – doesn't mean it's worth doing. It may hold no meaning for students. It may have simply been imposed on them, without their having had any say in the matter. In short, if we're busy fiddling with

scaffolding, we're less likely to stop and say, "Hold on – do students really need to do this at all?"

**4. Whose meanings?** Even if students have been asked to do something that's potentially meaningful, the assignment may just involve reproducing someone else's understanding rather than making sense of an idea for oneself. Suppose a teacher's goal is for students to adopt a conventional method for solving a math problem or setting up an experiment, or to be able to repeat the teacher's (or textbook's) interpretation of a story or an historical event. And suppose students are having trouble doing so. In that case, it might make sense to give them a hand, a hint, to take them halfway there – in short, to scaffold. But if the goal were to help students find their own way into the topic, to construct meaning in order to understand what they're doing more deeply, then scaffolding, at least as the term is typically used, would not be particularly useful.<sup>4</sup>

Too often, however, the problem runs deeper: It's not that students are merely adopting the teacher's meanings; it's that meanings aren't even involved – just the recitation of right answers, the rote recall of bits of information. Indeed, a failure to ask the four questions I've offered here may explain why the idea of scaffolding has been appropriated by behaviorists – people who still champion direct instruction, still make kids practice a series of skills devoid of context, still offer rewards for success (or compliance) as if they were training a pet. How ironic that a construction metaphor is placed in the service of a distinctly unconstructivist approach to education.

Of course *scaffolding* could be defined differently, in which case we needn't dispense with the word or the practice as long as we were careful to explain what we meant. So what would a better version look like?

\* It would offer support for the learner's own goals, not just

a technique for propelling her up an adult's ladder.

\* It would allow for the possibility of collaboration among students rather than assuming each must eventually complete all tasks alone.

\* It would be done in such a way as to respond to each student's needs rather than being presented as one-size-fits-all assistance – for example, by assigning the same (scaffolded) task to everyone.

\* It would involve suggesting new possibilities for learners to consider, helping them to “take an active, inventive role and reconstruct the task through their own understanding” rather than just “passively absorb[ing] the strategies of the adult,” as the early-childhood educator Anne B. Smith put it.<sup>5</sup>

\* The support would change along with the learner's understanding – which means changes in the type of support, not just in the amount, frequency, or duration.

\* Above all, the process of devising appropriate scaffolding would not displace the more important task of working *with* students to devise a thoughtful, question-based, learner-centered curriculum that involves understanding ideas from the inside out.

## NOTES

1. The concept is sometimes attributed to the early twentieth-century Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, but as far as I can tell, he never used the word – nor did Bruner et al. mention Vygotsky in the article where they introduced it. However, Vygotsky's concept of the “zone of proximal development” is related to, and probably helped to inspire, the notion of scaffolding; Bruner was certainly quite familiar with Vygotsky's work.

2. I discuss the limits of individualism in two books, one that explores the idea of

altruism (*The Brighter Side of Human Nature*) and another that challenges the ubiquitous, ferocious attacks on “helicopter parenting” (*The Myth of the Spoiled Child*).

3. Gay Ivey, “Texts That Matter,” *Educational Leadership*, March 2010, p. 20.

4. For a discussion of similar concerns about scaffolding from a constructivist perspective, see Catherine Twomey Fosnot, “Constructivism: A Psychological Theory of Learning,” in Fosnot, ed., *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice* (Teachers College Press, 1996), esp. p. 21. James Wertsch, a Vygotsky scholar at Washington University in St. Louis, raised a related concern regarding different types of meaning: “A scaffold is something you build up. You build a structure beside it, then build up the scaffolding some more, and the structure gets built up more. Eventually you take the scaffolding away. The problem is that this metaphor fails to account for qualitative transformation [where]...a partial structure...works well for this stage of development, but now we’re going to have to tear the whole thing down and switch from building in wood to building in brick. We don’t do that with scaffolding. Scaffolding has this kind of incremental quantitative development notion built into it...[whereas] during qualitative change you have major upheaval” (Brenda Fyfe, “A Conversation with James V. Wertsch: Part II,” *Constructivist*, Spring 1997, pp. 5-6).

5. Anne B. Smith, “Early Childhood Educare: Seeking a Theoretical Framework in Vygotsky’s Work,” *International Journal of Early Years Education*, vol. 1, 1993: 47-62. A Canadian language educator made essentially the same point even earlier: “The adequacy of the metaphor implied by scaffolding hinges on the question of who is constructing the edifice. Too often, the teacher is the builder and the child is expected to accept and occupy a predetermined structure” (Dennis Searle, “Scaffolding: Who’s Building Whose Building?,” *Language Arts* 61 [1984], p. 482). I am indebted to Tom Newkirk for pointing me to Searle’s article.

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