

Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding

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If you're an educator or have a student in school, you may have heard of the concept of Vygotsky scaffolding. It may sound like a construction term, but Vygotsky scaffolding and the related concept of the zone of proximal development are teaching methods that help students learn more information much more quickly than they would if traditional instruction. However, Vygotsky scaffolding is only effective if you know how to properly implement it; otherwise it can actually hinder a student's learning. Read this guide to learn what scaffolding and the zone of proximal development are, what the scaffolding psychology is, if studies have found these teaching methods to be effective, and how you can use these methods in the classroom to promote learning. What Is Instructional Scaffolding? Instructional scaffolding, also known as "Vygotsky scaffolding" or just "scaffolding," is a teaching method that helps students learn more by working with a teacher or a more advanced student to achieve their learning goals. The theory behind instructional scaffolding is that, compared to learning independently, students learn more when collaborating with others who have a wider range of skills and knowledge than the student currently does. These instructors or peers are the "scaffolding" who help the student expand her learning boundaries and learn more than she would be able to on her own. Vygotsky scaffolding is part of the education concept "zone of proximal development" or ZPD. The ZPD is the set of skills or knowledge a student can't do on her own but can do with the help or guidance of someone else. It's the skill level just above where the student currently is. ZPD is often depicted as a series of concentric circles. The smallest circle is the set of skills a student can learn on her own, without any help. Next is the ZPD, or skills a student wouldn't be able to do on her own, but can do with a teacher or peer helping her. Beyond that are skills the student can't do yet, even with help. For example, say there is a kindergartner who is learning how to read and write. He knows all the letters of the alphabet, but he can't yet read or write words. No matter how much guidance he was given, he could never read a novel on his own at this point, but with a teacher's help, he can learn how to read and write short words like "at," "boy" and "dog" because this skill is within is ZPD. It would have taken him much longer to learn this skill on his own, but it's still simple enough that he can understand it to him. The student's ZPD is reading and writing short words, and the teacher who helps him learn them is the scaffolding. Proponents of ZPD and instructional scaffolding believe they are highly effective ways to maximize a student's learning. Scaffolding can be used to help a person of any age learn something new, but in the classroom it is most often used with younger students (preschool and elementary school) since they are learning new skills and concepts they haven't been exposed to before most frequently. What's the History Behind Vygotsky Scaffolding? Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Soviet psychologist who coined the term "zone of proximal development" and conducted many studies that led to instructional scaffolding. This is why the concept is often referred to as "Vygotsky scaffolding." Vygotsky focused his work on developmental psychology, and it was in the 1920s and early 1930s, towards the end of his career, that he developed the concept of ZPD. Vygotsky believed that educators should help students learn within their ZPD so that they can increase their skills and knowledge without becoming frustrated by things that are currently too difficult for them to accomplish. Vygotsky came up with the idea of ZPD after extensive studying of how young children learn and the effectiveness of different teaching methods. He found that individual knowledge-based tests are often an inaccurate way to measure a young student's intelligence since children need to interact with others who are more intelligent than they currently are in order to learn. He cited many examples of cultures where young children are taught new skills and knowledge passed down by older generations. For example, when infants are learning how to walk, they often start by holding onto the clothes or hands of an adult or older child, who guides them. The infant will continue to do this until they have enough skills and strength to walk on their own. This way they're able to learn to walk much faster than if they were expected to learn without being able to hold onto anything. Vygotsky instead believed that the proper way to test young students was to test their ability to solve problems both independently and with the help of an adult. Dr. Maria Montessori, who established the Montessori education philosophy, also published similar research several decades before Vygotsky. Vygotsky died in 1934, less than a decade after he introduced the idea of ZPD, and after his death research on his ideas greatly decreased. In the 1960s, Vygotsky's work was revived by a new group of psychologists studying developmental psychology. Dr. Jerome Bruner coined the term "scaffolding" and connected it to Vygotsky's work. Dr. Bruner and other psychologists began studying the use of ZPD in different educational contexts, and they found that encouraging students to tackle the most difficult tasks within their ZPD leads to the most learning. Today scaffolding continues to be studied and used in schools, and much recent research has focused on how to use scaffolding to make classes (including online classes) more effective. Does Vygotsky Scaffolding Work? Over the past several decades, numerous studies have been conducted to study the effectiveness of using ZPD and scaffolding as teaching methods. Overall, research has shown that these methods can often help students learn more than they would compared to traditional teaching methods, but they require the instructor to have a good grasp of the student's ZPD so they can adapt the teaching method to them. An early study from 1975 found that four-year-olds whose mother's interacted with them and gave them advice were able to build significantly more complicated block towers than those who worked alone. The children who were most successful were those whose mothers adapted their strategy based on how well their child was completing the task. They made different comments based on whether the child was doing well or was struggling. A 1990 study found similar results when children were asked to put dollhouse furniture into the correct room. Children whose mothers gave them guidance were significantly more successful than those who completed the task on their own. A study published in 2000 that focused on a teacher using ZPD and scaffolding to teach a Farsi speaker English found that these methods can be an effective way to teach someone a new language. As the student improved his English skills, his teacher went from teaching individual words and phrases, to asking yes/no questions, to asking questions that required more in-depth responses. This gradual increase in difficulty helped the student improve his English skills while reducing feelings of frustration from attempting language skills beyond his current level. A similar scaffolding psychology study published in 2014 found that, in a group of 30 Australian language students, those who had tutors that used scaffolding techniques made significantly more progress in their writing quality and strategy application. Two studies, one from 2003 and one from 2010, found that ZPD and scaffolding can be effective, but if the instructor doesn't know how to implement them correctly, she is at risk of helping students too much which turns them into passive learners and hinders their growth. Tips for Using Vygotsky Scaffolding in the Classroom From the studies discussed above, we know that instructional scaffolding can be an effective teaching tool, but only if the instructor understands how to use it. Below are four tips for using scaffolding in the classroom. Know Each Student's ZPD In order to use ZPD and scaffolding techniques successfully, it's critical to know your students' current level of knowledge. Without this information, you won't be able to teach them in their ZPD or provide effective scaffolding support. Before you begin a lesson with ZPD or Vygotsky scaffolding, find their baseline knowledge by giving a short quiz or having an introductory discussion on the topic where you ask students questions to figure out what they already know. Also remember that each student will have a different ZPD for each topic you teach. If a class has widely varying ZPDs for a specific topic, it can be more effective to have them work in groups or individually while you walk around the classroom and provide guidance so that you can tailor your techniques to each student's ZPD. Encourage Group Work Group work can be a very effective way of using scaffolding principles in the classroom because students can learn from each other while working together on a project. More advanced students can help others learn while improving their own skills by explaining their thought process. Try to create groups that contain students with different skill sets and learning levels to maximize the amount students learn from each other. Make sure each student in the group is actively participating. If you see one student doing most of the work, have her ask the other students for their opinions, and emphasize the importance of everyone contributing. Don't Offer Too Much Help A potential drawback of Vygotsky scaffolding is the possibility of providing too much help. This causes the student to be a passive, instead of active, learner and actually reduces the amount the student learns. If you're using scaffolding techniques, don't jump in right away and start offering advice. Let each student work on their own first. When they begin to struggle, first start by asking them questions about what they've done and what they think they should do next. As much as possible, ask open-ended questions that encourage them to find a solution on their own, as opposed to just telling them the next step. For example, if a student is trying to build a block tower, it's much more helpful to say things like "How do you think you can make this tower stronger?" or "Why do you think the tower fell down?" than "You need to make the base bigger." If after you've had the student think through the problem, then you can begin offering concrete advice for what to do next, but be sure to continue to ask questions to help increase the student's understanding. For example, after giving advice on how to improve the block tower, you can ask "Why do you think making the base bigger helps the tower stay up?" Have Students Think Aloud Having students discuss their thought process is one of the best ways to figure out where their current skills are (and thus determine their ZPD) and make sure they're actively learning. As a student is working on a project, have her talk about why she's making certain decisions, what she thinks she should do next, and what she's unsure about. When you give advice, make sure you also explain your own thought process so students can understand why you're making the decisions you did. Summary: Vygotsky Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development Vygotsky scaffolding is a teaching method that uses instructors and more advanced peers to help students learn. The Vygotsky theory of cognitive development states that students will learn more when they receive guidance from someone with more skills in the subject they're learning than they would if they were tackling the subject on their own. Vygotsky scaffolding is part of the education theory the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development states that each student, for each subject, has three levels of learning: things the student can accomplish on her own, things she can accomplish with help from someone else (the zone of proximal development) and things she can't accomplish no matter how much help she has. The ZPD and Vygotsky scaffolding theory is that students learn the most when they're in their ZPD. Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed the ZPD and the Vygotsky theory of cognitive development, while Jerome Bruner developed scaffolding psychology several decades later. Studies have shown that scaffolding can be a very effective teaching method, as long as the teacher understands the concepts behind it and doesn't provide too much guidance. If using scaffolding and the zone of proximal development in the classroom, remember to know each student's ZPD, encourage group work, don't offer too much help, and have students explain their thought process out loud. What's Next? 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