Scaffolding in information literacy and writing: A collaborative approach to assignment design

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1. Develop a basic understanding of scaffolding, including benefits and challenges of this model

2. Reflect on the teaching landscape within their own academic environment to determine how this technique could be shared in a collaborative workshop setting
Literature indicates that students can be...

Overconfident
• Consider themselves “above average” in areas such as academic ability, drive to achieve, and writing skills (Twenge, Campbell & Gentile, 2012)

Overwhelmed
• Academic pressures = higher depression rates (Wynaden, Wichmann & Murray, 2013)
• Embarrassed/afraid to ask for librarians’ help (Robinson & Reid, 2007)
Students’ early perceptions of research

• “Today’s students go first to Google – with an early stop at Wikipedia...to find a variety of informational sources that can be assembled into a kind of collage paper that meets the assignment’s page limits and number of required sources.”

• 87% of freshmen think of research as “going to the library and finding books and articles to use in my paper.” (Ritter as cited in Bean)

• “The term ‘research paper’ conveys to our students the going-to-the-library part but leaves out the critical inquiry part.”

(Bean, 2011, p.226)
Emphasis on high-stakes assignments in traditional formats (i.e. essay @ end of term = 50%)

- Increased pressure on performance
- No opportunity to improve over time
- Standard, efficiency-based process
Is this the best way for learners to recognize IL and writing as critically engaging processes?
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• If not, what is the alternative?
• Next steps:
  • Similar trends with writing?
  • What is scaffolding in assignment design?
What is scaffolding?
Scaffolding in assignment design

A technique “where an assignment is broken into multiple, smaller assignments that progress in content and building complexity towards the final deliverable”

(Lowe, Stone, Booth & Tagge, 2016, p. 127).
Scaffolding in assignment design

Two types:

• **Backwards design/nesting**
  • “Disaggregating” the paper “into smaller components” (Odom & Helfers, 2016, p.553)

• **Repeated low-stakes**
  • Referred to by Bean (2011) as “microthemes”
  • Emphasizes a particular concept repeatedly at a low-stakes level
Scaffolding (in our application)

Supports students in building critical IL and writing skills in 3 ways:

- Focused on specific elements
- Multiple opportunities for skill development
- Feedback throughout the course
Students already expected to gain critical skills
  • Many struggling to understand/develop these skills through traditional papers
  • Applicable/beneficial within and beyond university

Collaboration/partnership between faculty, libraries, writing centre and teaching and learning centre
  • Opportunity to have a better understanding of our roles, challenges, and how we can work together going forward
  • Common goal: student success

Early evidence
  • Bean, *Engaging Ideas*
  • Anecdotally, via student interactions
“Scaffolding in Research and Writing: Designing Assignments for 1st and 2nd Year Students”

- Librarian/writing instructor partnership (design/facilitation)
- Piloted March 2017 via U of M’s teaching and learning centre
  - Offered again April 2018
- Session description: “Participants will learn how to help students build and develop critical skills in research and writing through assignment design.”
1. Critical skills in research and writing
   • Student-focused discussion questions:
     • What are the critical skills involved in research and writing for UG students?
     • With which skills do your students struggle?
     • Which skills do you address through instruction?
   • Trends in the literature/our own experiences
   • Introduction to IL/the Framework (activity – new for 2018)

2. Scaffolding assignments
   • Types of scaffolding

3. Application
   • Examples (literature/UM colleagues)
   • Final discussion questions (previous experience/next steps)
In the Literature:

- Findings varied more than expected, or didn’t provide the information we needed
- Few articles discussed IL explicitly (mostly writing)

Facilitation:

- Recognizing that we do not teach course content ourselves (authority?)
- Communicating that this is not a one-size-fits-all solution
- No way of knowing whether faculty will be receptive or interested
Workshop observations

• Gained insight on instructors’ experiences (i.e. priorities, difficulties, etc.)
• Shared our insights as student supports
• Many seemed in favor of implementing a scaffolded approach (lots of positive feedback)
  • High interest in colleagues’ examples
  • Eager for opportunities for open discussion
Workshop observations (post-session challenges)

• Unfamiliarity with IL (2017)
• Diversity of participants (2018)
  • Surprised by number of advanced learners
• Specific questions we can’t speak to (2018)
  • (i.e. grading scaffolded assignments in large class sizes, when implementing a peer-review activity)
• No way of knowing whether instructors will choose to implement scaffolding in assignment design and if so, what the results will be
Our next steps

- Follow-up session (spring/summer 2018)
- Session for graduate students who teach
- Continue to offer the original workshop
  - Interest in developing more formal evaluation/research project around the topic of scaffolding and the workshops themselves
What types of assignments already exist at your institution? Can you identify any trends, or dominant themes (i.e. research papers, scaffolded assignments, other?)

Consider the following (within your own role, and the roles of your faculty):

- What are the critical skills involved in IL and writing for your UG students?
- With which skills do your students struggle?
- Which skills are addressed through instruction?

Recognize (and communicate) that scaffolding is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but that it may be worth trying (based on responses to questions above)

Identify key partnerships on your campus and do your research in order to move forward

Adapt workshop elements to suit your own academic environment
References


Questions?

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