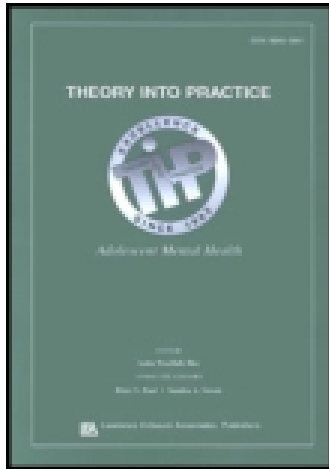


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Distributed Scaffolding in a Service-Learning Course

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Distributed Scaffolding in a Service-Learning Course

This article argues that the instructional scaffolding metaphor may be reconceived as distributed scaffolding when multiple means of influence are provided in a service-learning setting. In the service-learning course described here, the professor's role is largely as designer of activity settings for preservice teacher candidates, through which the students construct their own conceptions of teaching culturally diverse populations. The course involves a set of interrelated

settings: a tutoring experience at the city's alternative high school; the reading of books from a menu of texts that cover a range of diversity topics; the discussion of these books in book club meetings independent of the professor's direct influence; and the whole-class discussion of these texts, led by each student book club. The distributed nature of the course scaffolding is illustrated with an excerpt from one book club's discussion.

THE TERM *instructional scaffolding* is often attributed to Bruner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross,

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1976) to describe the manner in which a teacher supports a student's learning. There is no single, authoritative manner in which instructional scaffolding is achieved. Rather, as scaffolding is typically depicted, any instructional method that provides strong initial support that is gradually removed as the learner moves toward independence may be considered an instructional scaffold.

As typically employed, the scaffolding metaphor suggests that the teacher knows the best direction for thinking and learning, and that the student's role is to accommodate to that path. Further, the metaphor is often employed to

account for instruction designed to teach students how to perform on a single type of task, such as Hillocks's (1995) description of scaffolding students' development of procedures for learning how to produce particular types of writing such as extended definitions and arguments.

The scaffolding metaphor has its critics. Searle (1984) asked, *Who's building whose building?* In other words, the scaffolding metaphor suggests that the person providing the support will lead the learner toward the best possible construction. The question "Who's building whose building?" raises questions about the extent to which a teacher's decisions are always in the students' best interests. Dyson (1990) found the metaphor to be overly rigid and too focused on the teacher as expert. She suggested the metaphor of *weaving* instead, which she found more flexible and democratic in that students and teachers mutually influence one another, resulting in a common product that emerges from joint activity. Although the teacher often leads, she does so with careful attention to the student's progress; further, she remains open to the idea that the student may come up with an approach to learning to which a more impervious scaffold might be insensitive.

In this article, we challenge these notions of scaffolding by proposing how a service-learning course in teacher education can produce *distributed scaffolding*, in which multiple means of guidance are available to learners. We next provide a brief description of the course, and then illustrate the process of distributed scaffolding found in discussion transcripts from the class.

Service-Learning in Teacher Education

We next describe a course designed and taught by this article's first author, who teaches at his state's namesake university, which is highly selective in its admissions. The typical student tends to come from a relatively privileged background and has moved through school in an elite curriculum: honors and Advanced Placement courses, gifted and talented programs, International Baccalaureate curriculum, the

honors track, and other courses that sequester students according to school readiness and engagement, and consequently, affluence. Once on campus, students are again subjected to an admission process to enter the teacher education program, in which, in some years, only 60% of applicants are admitted. The teacher education population thus tends to be exclusive, with the modal demographic generally White, relatively well-off, suburban, female, and high achieving, with few having had substantive contact with poor, minority, immigrant, disaffected, or otherwise marginalized students.

When these teacher candidates begin their teaching careers, however, they are often assigned secondary school students who are decidedly different from themselves. The university course described here was designed to challenge the teacher candidates' deeply rooted assumptions about school by involving them in three interlocking settings: their work in an alternative school, their reading of books that attend to cultural differences, and their discussion of those books in book club settings. (The syllabus for the course is available at <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLsyllabus.htm>.)

The purpose of the course is not to produce people who can parrot professorial orthodoxy by the semester's end. Rather, it is designed to put them in dialogue with books of their choice that, over the course of the semester, engage them in reading, discussion, and personal experience with ideas, people, and situations that challenge their entering beliefs and assumptions, particularly about demographic groups about whom they have formed opinions in the absence of actual contact and interaction. The professor's orientation is to developmental psychology, rather than ideology. That is, students (and faculty) are viewed as works in progress, as learners, as people on intellectual journeys that are long in the making and, to use Vygotsky's (1934/1987) metaphor, follow a twisting, rather than linear, path of concept development. Students are not evaluated on their ultimate proximity to the professor's preferred beliefs, but on their efforts to develop beliefs of their own that are informed theoretically and experientially.

The course meets on campus each week for 2 to 3 hours and requires an additional hour each week of tutoring and mentoring a student in the city's alternative school. The students in this alternative school typically come from racial, ethnic, class-based, aspirational, and familial backgrounds far from the experiences of our teacher candidates. The course is designed to develop mutually educational experiences for the teacher candidates and the young people they tutor: The teacher candidates provide service to the community by helping the alternative school students with their schoolwork and providing mentoring that goes beyond academics and into other life issues; and the students being tutored educate the teacher candidates about how school is experienced by those who hate school, sharing their perspective of the value they place on education, their life goals, their experiences with teachers, their family and work situations and prospects, and whatever else emerges from their extended conversations.

The alternative school serves students who have had difficulty fitting in with conventional schooling. They represent a range of races but tend to come from lower socioeconomic classes. A number of the alternative school students bring their own young children to school with them to take advantage of the school's nursery, which anticipates teen pregnancy as part of the students' demographic realities. For the most part, the alternative school students hate school and are forthcoming in explaining why. They thus provide the sort of interaction that helps the university students learn about how school may be viewed by students whose life experiences and perspective on education are considerably different from their own.

For their course project, each teacher candidate may choose from among three topics (see <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLCourse-Projects.htm>). If it is possible to develop a stable and sustained tutoring and mentoring relationship with a single student at the alternative school, the course paper could be a case study of the student. Many teacher candidates, however, have difficulty establishing such continuity with an alternative school student because the students

may drop out or be dismissed from the school because of absences or other rules violations. Alternative assignments—each suggested by enrollees in the service-learning course in response to their experiences at the school—have been developed so that those who make good-faith efforts to meet the course requirements can also write a course paper outlining what they have learned from tutoring a variety of students, or maintain a blog in which they relate their unfolding impressions and understandings on a weekly basis. Over time, the course has been opened to additional forms of representing their ideas, such as producing fictionalized accounts of their service-learning experiences.

Class sessions on campus are devoted to book club meetings, a form of literature study that is gaining a foothold in schools (O'Donnell-Allen, 2006, 2011). The menu of readings represents a range of issues that might arise in teacher candidates' engagement with high school students of various cultural backgrounds and include attention to socioeconomic class, race, culture, youth culture, urban education, immigration, bilingualism, gender, and related issues (see <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLBook-Clubs.htm>).

The class is structured so that each book club group of 3–5 teacher candidates discusses three books during the course of the semester. Each book occupies them for 3 weeks. During the first session, they discuss the book however they wish; during the second session they continue this discussion while also planning how they will lead the third session, in which they lead a discussion of their book with their classmates. The pedagogy is thus designed to help teacher candidates see that there are alternatives to the lecture-and-discussion approach to teaching that they have experienced throughout much of their school lives. This approach also allows the teacher candidates to discuss issues that they might resist, if the faculty member were to initiate and direct their inquiries and to challenge their cherished beliefs appropriated from home, community, and often church life.

The intersection of teacher candidates' prior beliefs, their tutoring and mentoring experiences

at the alternative school, their engagement with books from the book club menu, and their discussions and class presentations often produce a perplexing dissonance. This dissonance, indeed, is among the course design's goals, serving to trouble the teacher candidates' vision of themselves as English teachers, lecturing on Milton and Faulkner to rapt student audiences. The professor's role in the course primarily comes through the design of the class and supervision of the discussions and tutoring. In other words, the course serves as a scaffold for student learning through the provision of activities through which teacher candidates take their own direction. The teacher candidates' support for understanding the education of diverse populations thus comes from a variety of sources:

- The foundation of their prior experiences in school and in society, which are subject to critique;
- The experiences available in the alternative school, which might include the school's computer-driven curriculum, alternative school students with whom they develop relationships, and the school's teachers and administrators with whom they coordinate their tutoring;
- The individual reading they do based on selections from the course book club menu;
- The book club discussions, which are a function of the particular group membership in relation to the reading; and
- The whole-class discussions led by the book club groups, which provide exposure to a broad range of texts, authors, and perspectives and opportunities to engage with them.

In contrast with conventional notions of instructional scaffolding in which one teacher guides learners toward a particular sort of knowledge, the service-learning course is designed to provide this distributed scaffolding. The purpose is not to impose the professor's ideological orthodoxy on the students to make them culturally sensitive, a goal that has little chance of succeeding in our Southern university and its generally conservative student population. Rather, the goal is to

place the students in a series of related settings in which they read and discuss challenges of educating diverse populations while also establishing a relationship with a small set of students from backgrounds that are not conducive to high rates of affiliation with school, and thus evaluating the scholarly ideas in light of the reality of their tutoring experiences.

Distributed Scaffolding in a Service-Learning Course

We next look at an excerpt from the first book club discussion conducted among four university sophomores, identified by the pseudonyms Christy, Keri, Tanya, and Laura. This article is not written to provide extensive information on research methods, but, briefly, the student discussions were all transcribed and then subjected to an analysis that identified both concepts explored and the sources that the students' drew on to inform their opinions, including the books that they read but extending to additional sources such as the students they tutored at the alternative school, their knowledge from their own educational experiences, their understandings from other university courses, and other sources of knowledge that we considered to represent distributed scaffolding. The course was designed so that Searle's (1984) concern for whose building is being constructed from scaffolds deflects authority from the course professor and enables the students to determine and distribute the scaffolding for their thinking across sources of their choice, including one another as classmates and discussants. The assumption behind this approach is that students will not necessarily gravitate to the professor's orthodoxies but, instead, engage with ideas such that they develop a robust conception of diversity education of their own, one that will presumably continue to develop as their coursework, careers, and experiences unfold.

The first book they selected for their meetings was Delpit and Dowdy's (2002) edited volume, *The Skin that We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*, and early in their

discussion they considered Dowdy's chapter "Ovuh Dyuh," which means "over there" in Dowdy's Trinidadian homeland's vernacular English. Dowdy bases her chapter's insights on the manner in which she was mocked by her classmates as a child for using English, rather than Trinidadian, pronunciation. The incident profoundly affected Dowdy's understanding of linguistic variety and the effects of colonialism on her homeland. This theme resonated with the focus of the other chapters in the book, all of which deal with the relation between culture and language and how teachers can be more sensitive to, and more productive with, linguistic variation.

We begin by presenting an uninterrupted excerpt from the transcript, and then discuss how we see their discussion revealing the manner in which their thinking followed from the distributed scaffolding available from multiple sources following from the course design:

Christy: I felt like with this one, um like, I could apply newer things to—like, especially because what I got out of it is kind of like, um, like, African American slang is almost what they were depicting I think [Um hmm] if I remember correctly. And um, it—I don't know—I think I could use this one more so than some of the other ones. [Um hmm.]

Keri: I thought it was interesting, like, to think that a lot of the chapters weren't talking about, like, education in the United States, but it could still be applied to education here.

Tanya: I'm sure none of us really grew up this way, having people tell us that the way we were speaking was wrong. [Yeah.] The way that we grew up was wrong. And it's almost like—they are forced to deny their individuality. [Yeah.]

Laura: Like getting rid of your home language, the thing that you speak in your house, is not acceptable anywhere else.

Christy: And that was hard to um, like, like because like you said I had, I hadn't had the experience that the language that I speak in my house was wrong or shouldn't be read, and that was, like as a future teacher, that was hard to like wrap

your mind around that when you correct a child, they could translate it in to the way that I speak at home is not right, not correct.

Laura: I think it, um, one of the big points of the book was to, like, you can correct them, but just—let them know that this is the standard of normal English that you need to use in, like, job interviews and really important situations, not that you are wrong, but that this is another way to do it.

Christy: And I felt like the book, like all throughout her like, um, like, um, scenarios and situations where you could use different types of techniques, depending on the case.

Keri: Well, I was just gonna say that I don't think that book was about, like, that, that not any individual way of speaking was wrong, but like different languages, different ways of speaking are appropriate for certain situations; it's not about correctness, it's about appropriateness.

Christy: I was actually like with my, um, [alternative school] kid, we were [working on the instructional software used at the alternative school], and it's like one of the activities, and you have to, like, read a passage and say what was the tone for of the passage and everything, and, like, I don't remember if it was tone, but it was something of that sort, and, like, um, she had to pick if it was colloquial, if it was like all of this other shhh, like all the different types, like if it was formal, informal, colloquial, and, like, when I was explaining it to her, 'cause she didn't exactly understand, I said, "How would you talk, like, with your friends?" That would be inf—that would be colloquial. But, like, if you were going to talk to your teacher, like that would be informal, and if you were on a job interview, that would be formal. And I think that's, like, some of the book reiterated that fact, it's just like when were used it.

Tanya: I think there's a fine line between, you know, correcting them in the context of their language without making them feeling inferior.

Laura: It's really hard to figure out how to do that.

Keri: I think it's different in different situations with different students. [Yeah.]

Christy: I remember reading it, like one chapter, and I would say okay, so, like thinking in my head, like, "When I get into a classroom, I will correct the child in a nice way when he speaks in class," and then in the next chapter I was, like, "WELL maybe I won't do that [Laughter] because you're correcting him too much."

Keri: I did the same thing; I went back and forth, like, 'cause it's, 'cause it's, because you read like all this that they're saying you shouldn't correct them at all [Uh hmm, Yeah], and there's contradictory messages.

Laura: It just made me question what I am going to be doing when I'm a teacher, like how am I going to handle all of this, these different, I don't know, you know so many different students, different cultures, different backgrounds, and—

Christy: And like because everybody's unique, they're going to take, you know, you could correct one child, and maybe "Okay, well I know next time that I am speaking in class I can't say it like that," and then another child could take it as "Well, you're just completely going against my entire life and the language we speak at the house," [Um hmm] and that's not good either.

Tanya: I was going to say since it seems like there are so many contradicting ideas, the only thing that I can draw from it is that there is different situations and each classroom is going to be different; so therefore, there are a lot of contradictory ideas about this book, and we just have to figure out for ourselves and be aware of every possible thing that could go wrong. [Laughter.] Kind of overwhelming, but—

Christy: From like a student's point of view, like, some of the chapter, like, talked about, like, the mental conflict that the student had, like, you know, yeah, "I speak this way at my house and I speak this way at school," and then I can see where they could, like, lose, like, a little bit of their identity and not

then know what to do or when to do it, because, like, your friends, if you, if you know they talked about, like, if you spoke correct grammar in front of your friends, like, they might make fun of you, but if you didn't speak correct grammar in school, you would get chastised. So I mean, like, I could understand it being caught in a conflict between them.

We selected this excerpt to represent their discussion because it includes a host of references to various means of distributed scaffolding. For their discussion, the group attended to the source text (*The Skin We Speak*; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) for the basic ideas that propelled their consideration of the relation among race, culture, and language. Laura, for instance, stated that "one of the big points of the book was to, like, you can correct them, but just—let them know that this is the standard of normal English that you need to use in, like, job interviews and really important situations, not that you are wrong, but that this is another way to do it." Such a reference might be expected in a discussion stimulated by the text that they had read in common.

In a teacher-led class discussion, the text and the professor's guidance of the discussion would provide a relatively unidirectional path based on his own reading of the text and his priorities for diversity education. As we note, however, in the book club setting the students directed their own discussion in light of a range of experiences. Without explicit professorial guidance, they also conducted their inquiry in an exploratory fashion (see Barnes, 1992), as indicated by the hemming and hawing that often accompanies the expression of ideas that are not fully formed but, rather, in the process of development. We see the discussants' frequent use of what are often called *speech disfluencies*—i.e., fillers, false starts, and repairs in spontaneous speech—as signs of emergent thinking rather than lack of linguistic fluency.

To make their understanding of Dowdy's points concrete, the students drew on a variety of personal experiences. Consistent with the assumptions behind the course design, they contrasted what they read with what they had experienced in their own lives, with Christy

noting, “I hadn’t had the experience that the language that I speak in my house was wrong or shouldn’t be read,” a point on which the others agreed. Although it is not evident in the transcript we have provided, the students drew on a range of personal experiences that included their family lives, their school experiences, their interactions with friends, their engagement with popular culture, and their general awareness of society. By most accounts, such sources are not available in most university classroom discussions where the professor’s priorities drive discussions (Addington, 2001).

The students readily drew on their experiences at the alternative school, as illustrated by Christy’s reference to her student’s navigation of the instructional software used at the site and how it raised the issue of formal versus colloquial speech. These various sources contributed to a final factor we emphasize in this article, that being the students’ projection of their future teaching selves, as when Laura began to “question what I am going to be doing when I’m a teacher” in a diverse setting. This anticipation of a future teaching self, we argue, served to crystalize the students’ emerging understanding of the book’s concepts into their practical understanding of the themes under discussion.

Conclusion

Notably absent from the students’ discussion, here and throughout the transcripts, are references to the course professor’s beliefs and priorities. Rather, the course design provided distributed scaffolding through which the students constructed their own conceptions of the factors involved in diversity education. Our brief illustration of this phenomenon suggests an important potential for service-learning courses, that being an opportunity for students to engage with difficult concepts without being shepherded toward a professor’s preferred interpretations. In doing so, the students take on a critical disposition without the patronizing sort of professorial guidance that often accompanies the imposition of critical theory on those who

are presumed to lack the capacity to think clearly for themselves (Cushman, 1999). Much of their learning takes place from disaffected secondary school students, rather than university professors steeped in theory. The professor’s role is to rely on a design that enables a variety of experiences to be orchestrated through discussion into an emerging conception of a challenge such as diversity education among students whose own education has been relatively exclusive and sheltered from distraction. Within this design, preservice teachers take part in discussions around texts that lead to insights related to diversity education and difference. These discussions, and the course projects that emerge from their engagement with the settings of distributed scaffolding designated in the course plan, in turn suggest pedagogical possibilities for their anticipated future teaching: using the book club format itself, understanding the value of critical discussion, seeking ways to implementing teaching ideas suggested in the source text, treating students of difference in more respectful and understanding ways, thinking of ways to include a broader range of students in opportunities for succeeding within the curriculum, and promoting broad participation in classroom activities that enable secondary students to arrive at critical understandings in ways similar to those afforded by the service-learning class design.

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