By Huntly Collins, La Salle University, PA
collinsb@lasalle.edu

“What is REAL asked the Rabbit one
day. Does it mean having things that buzz
inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the
Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you.
When a child loves you for a long, long time,
not just to play with, but REALLY loves
you, then you become Real. It doesn’t happen
all at once. You become. It takes a long time.
Generally, by the time you are Real, most of
your hair has been loved off, and your eyes
drop out and you get loose in the joints and
very shabby. But these things don’t matter at
all, because once you are Real you can’t be
ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

— Margery Williams,
The Velveteen Rabbit

The past three years have been a time of
growth for me, some of it painful. I
have become more humble and less arro-
gant. I have become less product-driven
and more process-oriented. I have become
less judgmental of my students’ learning
gaps and more engaged in helping them
make up those gaps. I have learned not to
teach to the middle just because most of
my students are in the middle, but rather
to challenge everyone to go beyond where
they think they can go. I have taken more
risks and been less afraid to make mistakes.
I have learned to worry less about the stu-
dents’ perceptions of me and more about
whether they understand what I am teach-
ing. I have learned to let go of my precon-
cieved ideas about students and to open
myself to the surprises that each individu-
al student has to offer.

I believe I have made a difference in
the lives of my students, and I know they
have made a difference in mine. Like the
Skin Horse, I have learned that teaching
isn’t about shiny new technology or well-
organized lesson plans impressively
arrayed in a binder. Although these
things help, teaching is really about being
present for students and sharing with
them the only thing we ultimately have to
share, which is ourselves. Over the past
three years, I have brought to my students
all the reporting and writing skills I accu-
mulated over nearly a 30-year career as a
reporter. I’ve shared my passion for the
craft, its important role in giving a voice
to the voiceless, and a sense of the great
adventures that await those who learn to
practice it well. I hope I have also given
them a new appreciation for the power
and beauty of the English language and
imbued in them a desire to write well,
whether they are going into journalism
or some other profession or simply writing
for their own pleasure.

Among the lessons learned as I’ve
worked to grow as a teacher is that the
process of learning is often as important
as the end product. For me, this is a radi-
cal change. As a journalist, all that mat-
tered to my editors and me was getting
the story, getting it right, and telling it in
a compelling way. All eyes were on the
story, not on what I might have learned in
the process of doing it. When I first
arrived at La Salle, I put a similar empha-
sis on the end product in my journalism
classes. Even though I tried to take into
account the place where students were
starting, I focused almost exclusively on
the quality of their stories, not on the
process of their own development in get-
ting the stories.

Today, however, I take as much pride
in my students’ sometimes halting efforts
toward the goal as in their ability to reach
the goal. The terribly shy student who,
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What it Means to be a Self-Regulated Learner

“Self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills.” (p. 65) That definition is offered by Barry Zimme rman, one of the foremost researchers on self-regulated learning. It appears in a succinct five-page article that offers a very readable overview of research in this area.

Three research findings are highlighted. First, “self-regulation of learning involves more than detailed knowledge of a skill; it involves the self-awareness, self-motivation, and behavioral skill to implement that knowledge appropriately.” (p. 66) The point here is that large differences have been observed between the way novices and experts view their learning. Novices rely on feedback from others; they compare their performances with those of others. They fail to set goals or monitor their learning. They frequently attribute failure to deficiencies that can’t be remedied. “I’m just not smart enough.” Expert learners manage their learning at every stage. They recognize when they have failed but then focus on how they can fix what went wrong.

Second, self-regulation is not a trait that some students have and others do not. Rather, “it involves the selective use of specific processes that must be personally adapted to each learning task.” (p. 66) It’s about setting goals, selecting strategies to attain those goals, monitoring progress, restructur ing if the goals are not being met, using time efficiently, self-evaluating the methods selected, and adapting future methods based on what was learned this time through.

Finally, there is a relationship between self-regulation and “perceived efficacy and intrinsic interest.” (p. 66) Learners have to believe they can learn, whatever the task before them, and they need to be motivated. “With such diverse skills as chess, sports, and music, the quantity of an individual’s studying and practicing is a strong predictor of his or her level of expertise.” (p. 66) One notable finding from research: the actual process of self-regulating can be a source of motivation, even for those tasks that may not be motivating themselves.

The article identifies three times when self-regulation aids the learning process. First, before the learning task is tackled, the learner should analyze the task, set goals, and develop a plan of approach. Obviously, beliefs about the self as a learner influence decisions made at this stage. Second, learners need to self-regulate as they do the learning (or perform the task). They need to deploy specific learning strategies or methods and then observe how well those strategies and methods are working. Finally, they need to self-reflect after completion of the learning task. This involves self-evaluation and “causal attribution,” which refers to beliefs about what caused the outcome. If a student has done poorly on a math exam and attributes the score to an inability to learn math, that attribution damages motivation, whereas attributing the score to misuse of particular equations means there’s a chance the student can fix the problem. Reflection after the fact also includes whether the learner is satisfied with the performance—that too impacts subsequent motivation.

Despite the power of self-regulation to motivate learners and to increase their success, “few teachers effectively prepare students to learn on their own. Students are seldom given a choice regarding academic tasks to pursue, methods for carrying out complex assignments, or study partners. Few teachers encourage students to establish specific goals for their academic work or estimate their competence on new tasks.” (p. 69) Zimmerman goes on to point out that most teachers don’t give students opportunities to self-assess their work and most do not explore student beliefs about themselves as learners.

Grading Participation Fairly: Student Perceptions

If grading participation involves anything more than comment counting, it’s not an easy task. In addition to generating relevant criteria, the process requires that instructors make assessments at the same time they attempt to facilitate provocative and engaging discussion. Given that reality, it isn’t very surprising that many instructors grade participation “loosely,” relying on general impressions of what a student contributed across the semester. And normally, since these participation grades are integrated with other grades at the end of the semester, students don’t object. But is this approach to grading fair?

Students’ perceptions of fairness do not provide the definitive answer to that question but their opinions do matter and can, in fact, be quite instructive as documented by a study that examined what factors made students think that a participation grading scheme was fair.

Researchers conducted two different studies, both involving scenarios constructed after an extensive review of syllabi. Findings confirmed their hypotheses and identified three factors that contributed positively to student perceptions of fairness.

Explicitness of grading criteria—Students consistently rated as more fair those scenarios that detailed exactly how participation would be graded. Was it only a matter of quantity of contributions or did quality matter? Did the grade include things like coming to class late and leaving early? Did engaged participation in group work count?

Frequency of feedback—Students want to know how well they’re doing with respect to participation. “In Study 1, frequency of feedback had the highest mean for perceived fairness and the largest main effect size of the three independent variables.” (p. 366) In other words, it was the most important factor in determining whether students thought participation was being graded fairly.

Proactive instruction techniques—Researchers defined these as the mechanisms instructors use to encourage participation in discussion. Examples offered included cold calling on silent students as a way of drawing them into discussion and identifying discussion topics beforehand so students had the opportunity to prepare before class.

In comparing the relative importance of these three factors, the researchers write, “Perhaps the most important changes that instructors can make to improve the perceived fairness of their contribution grades [they differentiate between participation and contribution] are to be more explicit with students about how these grades are determined and to report these determinations frequently.” (p. 366)

What these students perceived as fair seems fair and justified. If you don’t know how your contributions are being assessed and you never get feedback, then you don’t know how you’re doing and there’s no opportunity for improvement.

Even though the development of verbal communication skills may not be an objective in every course, if participation is going to be graded, everybody needs to know what counts. Clear criteria make it less likely that teacher bias (even unnoticed bias) will enter the grading equation to the detriment of some students and to the benefit of others. Clear criteria and frequent feedback have the potential to raise the caliber of discussions, as well.

The scenarios used in this research are included in the article as well as a series of items that could be used to evaluate various participation grading schemes—both are excellent resources for instructors.


BECOMING A TEACHER

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you’re not supposed to be an intellectual or academically talented, so why even try? To address that, I’ve tried to expose students to the very best reporting and writing in America. I’ve also tried to give them more confidence in themselves, in the truth of their own experience, and in the power of expression. Some, miraculously, have responded. It has been truly wonderful to watch as students who never thought much about themselves have discovered, under my tutelage, that they have the potential to be excellent writers. “You mean this is really good?” “Yes, it’s really good. And here’s how you can make it even better.”

Teaching at La Salle has given me, like the Skin Horse, a few more gray hairs. But it has also made me wiser and more real.

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Why Group Work Improves Problem-Solving Abilities

Last month’s issue contained an article highlighting an impressive study documenting the positive effects of group collaboration on the development of problem-solving skills. Researchers found students in the study improved their problem-solving skills by about 10 percent. Moreover, the benefits of group collaboration extended even when students went back to working problems on their own. The question we didn’t have space to answer in that article is why—“why does simply working collaboratively in a group in an unstructured environment have such a positive effect on problem solving and why does this effect linger in subsequent performances?” That’s how this research group framed the question. (p. 871)

The answers aren’t all that profound, but they merit review because they are often overlooked or ignored. Problem solving in a group slows down the process. It forces students to be more thoughtful or, more precisely, as the educational psychologists would point out, it promotes metacognition. Now students have to explain to others why they think a particular action should be taken and what they anticipate will happen as a result of that action. Guessing or glossing over the details doesn’t hold up when there are competing explanations or others to be convinced.

The researchers identify three aspects of these explanations, each of which has the potential to develop problem-solving skills. First, when the student explains why, that explanation may help others learn. We have written previously in the newsletter of the power of those explanations—while they may not be explanations as the teacher would frame them, they make sense to learners learning something for the first time. Sometimes a student can actually help another student understand better than the teacher can. Students who have just learned something remember the way into that understanding, whereas teachers who’ve known and used the knowledge for years forget what it looked like when they first confronted it.

Next, the problem may be solved in a group by co-construction. Students elaborate and otherwise build on each other’s answers, creating a solution collectively. The process may involve controversy and critique, but again it is a process that causes students to engage and think more deeply about the problem and its solution.

Finally, there is the benefit of self-explanation. Ideas often exist in amorphous forms. They kind of make sense. They may even be right but the student may not understand why. When an idea must be articulated, either spoken or written, it is made concrete, and that tangible form makes it much easier to see and to understand if and how the original idea hangs together. Said simply, students understand something better when they say it. We’re back to the age-old insight that teaching is sometimes the best way to learn or to understand at a fuller and deeper level.

What this discussion does not fully explain is why or how these experiences with others change individual approaches to problem solving. Because what these researchers discovered was that when students went back to problem solving on their own, they did it differently and they used strategies that were more effective. Did they pick up these strategies from each other? Did they more clearly see that some approaches worked better than others did? Did the experience of working with others empower them to try approaches other than their own? Interesting questions with answers yet to be discovered.


A Large Course with a Small Course Option

At a skills conference for teaching assistants, sponsored by the Institute for Teaching, Learning & Academic Leadership at the University at Albany (a research university within the SUNY system), Erica Hunter, a graduate student in sociology, did a presentation in which she shared an innovative course design whereby she creates a small class within a much larger one.

Hunter developed the model based on some sanguine observations about students taking a 300-level special topics in culture course. Many are in the course to fulfill a requirement. They don’t plan on being sociologists and have, at best, a fleeting interest in the field. But some in the class are interested; they may find the content intriguing, be inherently curious, or have a commitment to learning in every course. Hunter wanted to provide those students with a rich classroom experience, but how could she do that in a course enrolling 123 students, of which a significant portion did not find the course content particularly motivating?

Hunter responded by designing two different options for the course. In one, students attend lectures and take four exams, each worth 25 percent of their grade. In the second option, students also take the four exams plus they complete a set of eight writing assignments responding to reading and discussion topics. The writing assignments account for 20 percent of their grade, which makes each exam worth 20 percent of their grade. It’s a good option for anxious or not very good test takers. Hunter had students select one of these options at the beginning of the
The Guest Scholar Project

By Alex MacDonald, Campion College at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan
alex.macdonald@uregina.ca

Last year I received a grant to support bringing guest scholars to my class. The idea was to find students with some expertise relevant to my courses and invite them to present in class, thereby giving them the opportunity to teach or perform and giving the class a perspective on the material that I couldn’t provide. The grant enabled me to pay the guest scholars a stipend for their work. I had both the guest scholars and students complete questionnaires after these visits to class.

Here’s the rationale behind the idea. The task of the teaching professor is to educate, but what does that mean? The traditional notion is that education is something done by the students by the professor. The contrary radical notion is that education is something done by students for themselves—the old comparison between the student as container and the student as plant. A middle ground, which seems closer to reality than either of these theoretical positions, is that education is something done both by the professor with the students and by the students with the professor.

The professor in a class typically establishes the structure, proposes the agenda, delivers some significant proportion of the content, and assesses student progress. Students can suggest changes to the structure and agenda, contribute some proportion of the content by means of discussions and choices of topics, and may also participate in assessment. One important goal of this two-way educational process is to enable students to do more for themselves.

An opportunity to be a guest scholar offers a way for the student to develop independent scholarship while enriching the course content and learning experiences of a class.

I launched the project with an advertisement distributed via the university email. It yielded one potential guest scholar for the trial run. I interviewed the student and we agreed on a topic and a date. This was a senior undergraduate student in economics, who made a presentation on the concept of guaranteed or basic annual income in my humanities class on utopian literature; the class was studying Edward Bellamy’s novel Looking Backward, in which guaranteed income is a central notion.

In a subsequent semester three other guest scholars were discovered more serendipitously; one in a departmental committee meeting and two others by way of a student introduction. A master’s student in English, writing a thesis on the novels of Philip Roth, came to my short story class to speak about Roth’s early story “The Conversion of the Jews.” Two acting students in the theatre program came to my 19th century survey class to present a scene from The Importance of Being Earnest, and afterward to talk with the class about theatrical and literary issues.

Questionnaire responses from the students were overwhelmingly positive in all three cases; they found the presentations interesting and informative with quite a few urging more guest presentations. The students also offered practical suggestions for the guest scholars, such as making better use of the chalkboard. I passed these on as part of the “feedback.” For their part, the guest scholars reported that the experience was challenging and worthwhile, teaching them about aspects of their topics they had not fully considered, such as basic annual income and work incentive, the essential difference between novel and short story, and the expectations of a dramatic audience.

The experience was instructive for me as well as their perceptions about and controls the amount of time the teacher is spending grading writing assignments.

Yes, all students would benefit from writing in the course, but it’s not realistic to expect an instructor to grade that much writing. However, this model gives all students the opportunity to select a version of the course that includes writing. It’s a design that lets students make decisions about the quality of experience they want in the course and at the same time allows the instructor to deal with the realities of large course instruction. Kudos to a graduate student for coming up with such a clever design: it’s a large course that can be taken in a smaller package.
A Critique of Scaffolding

By Larry D. Spence, Penn State University
lds7@psu.edu

“So, what does that mean—I need to provide more scaffolding?” a superlative teacher asked, with frustration in his voice. He was just back from a peer review debrief.

“Maybe that’s more a suggestion than a criticism,” I offered. “Okay, but what do I do to provide more scaffolding?” he asked.

In the age of Google, answers are only a click away. Soon I was poking through a confusing array of 234,000 options. During the last 30 years, scaffolding has at one time or another referred to any and all teaching activities: modeling, assessing, questioning, monitoring, and prompting as well as baby talk, software, textbooks, problems, analogies, and plain old encouraging words. Scaffolding can be provided by parents, siblings, mentors, peers, instructors, and communities. It can refer to physical objects like computers and calculators or cultural objects like language and tradition. It is a noun referring to material and symbolic structures. It is a verb referring to transient actions.

Meaning anything that might help someone learn, the term seems to be another way of gassing up the folkways of teaching so that they sound profound. Researchers use it to discuss what teachers do when focused on learners. Acclaimed as “one of the most recommended, versatile, and powerful instructional techniques,” it supposedly prompts teachers to get out of the way.

So what did the peer reviewer mean when he told my colleague to “provide more scaffolding”? Probably the reviewer thinks my colleague’s students need more help. What kind of help? The help that helps them learn. How much more? As much help as helps them learn more. With this language, experts (and peer reviewers) can say something erudite about any classroom practice without offering much in the way of help. Can we do any better?

Sometimes good metaphors further understanding. Such figures of speech can help us see familiar aspects in something new or see something familiar in a new light. The scaffolding metaphor doesn’t do either. It functions more like a crock of oatmeal (to use a metaphor) covering and congealing what instructors do. Not finding any help there, let’s try considering scaffolding as an object. How does it function? Some authors write as if it holds up buildings under construction. Others more correctly note that it is a transient structure that supports workers who lay bricks, erect beams, nail siding, or paint window frames.

So how might scaffolding as an object relate to teaching? It can refer to efforts to prop up a learner or to create a situation in which a learner can do something. Accordingly, instruction can prevent failure or enable learning. Either teaching is a set of protective activities that eliminate mistakes and reduce frustration or it is what an instructor designs to allow learners to perform beyond their normal capacity. In our hearts we would like our teaching to do both.

But the point of teaching cannot be to eliminate or even reduce the likelihood of failure. To eliminate failure throttles the learner. For the student does the learning. The student must be free to think and act and, in so doing, err—and recover. That is the cost of learning. To prescribe that teachers enable learning is a tautology. Of course that is what we want to do—the question we beg is: “How?”

If scaffolding is to help answer that question, it should illuminate the differences between what the teacher does and what the student does. It should get us to think about the instructor as a planner and initiator of activities that invite students to develop their own goals and strategies.

As we know, learning grows out of the students’ previous knowledge and skills. But the assignment must challenge without being so difficult as to discourage learning or so easy as to evade it. Both student and instructor have to be active. Importantly, the instructor’s actions cannot replace or suppress the students’ actions. The teacher’s role is more collaborative—shoulder to shoulder not higher reaching down or at the side propping up.

How do you help without promoting helplessness? How do you challenge without promoting defeat? How do you induce learning by doing without scarring those who cannot do? These questions need research and discussion that take a fresh perspective and vocabulary that helps us name the crucial activities. What we don’t need are more names for our ignorance that don’t clarify our practice.

Are there any good metaphors out there to help us describe, discuss, and conduct research on these issues? More likely they are to be found in other learning situations. To start, here are two: the training wheels we put on bicycles to enable youngsters to learn balance and the T-ball pedestal that allows six-year-olds to play baseball. Each device works by restricting and focusing the teacher’s role while expanding the learner’s opportunities. Both offer new and more fruitful ways of looking at learning designs and teaching practices. Both allow us to escape the scaffolding that now prevents further construction of understanding.

GUEST SCHOLAR
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