

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for
advancing teaching and learning at Mona

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Scaffolding for Advancing Learning

Scaffolds are forms of support temporarily provided by instructors when introducing new content and making assignments. Novice learners, like construction workers, need structures of temporary support during their efforts to build something new; once the initial phase of construction is in place, the scaffolds can be withdrawn.

Procedural Guidelines

Procedural Guidelines function as concrete references students can rely on for support as they attempt to complete new and complex tasks/ assignments. This scaffolding strategy is often used when assignments involve a particular series of steps, procedures, or questions. The sequence or checklist is presented during instruction and is used later as a guide by students as they work independently on the assignment.

Description: Too often novice learners are given only brief explanations of assignments and they are expected to somehow replicate the steps on their own. Even if examples of desired end products are provided by instructors, the steps taken to achieve those end products often remain a mystery to students. Providing students with a set of Procedural Guidelines to follow when working independently from teachers is what effective instructors do on a regular basis. These teachers force themselves to become consciously aware of the steps that they (as experts) intuitively follow when critiquing plays, creating personal fitness schedules, writing persuasive essays, recording lab results, selecting math formulas, or designing marketing plans. They then record the sequence of steps that they took and share it with their students. When assignments or problems are complex in nature, students' intellectual energies can be best spent engaged in the struggle of the application of the new content rather than in inefficient and frustrating attempts to divine how the experts arrived at the solution.

Partial Solutions

Partial Solutions involve presentation of a complex task that is already partially completed by the instructor so that students can more successfully complete the task by focusing on only a few elements while trying to assimilate new information. The Partial Solutions scaffold also allows instructors to regulate the level difficulty when students first attempt the application of new ideas or skills. This form of guided practice temporarily reduces the complexity for novice learners while requiring focused attention to the content just covered.

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Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Instructional Development Unit (IDU) at the UWI, Mona.
- The Newsletter is published once per month and provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education. It is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/idu/>) as well as in the office of the IDU.
- If you have an area that you would like to explore using this medium, do not hesitate to contact us at the IDU.



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Description: Novice learners benefit greatly when not required to independently complete an entirely new and complex learning task. Too often, students are given only brief explanations of new content followed by assignments that will be graded. Typical assignments often include lab reports, critiques of research articles, persuasive essays, sets of word problems, or case study solutions. Assigning is not teaching, and students need much more specific instructional support than is typically provided. Each of these types of assignments can be broken down to isolate parts that students can practice. For example, using Partial Solutions with persuasive essays, instructors provide the main arguments and supporting points, and students are required in practice sessions, to submit rational evidence for each supporting point made. The next step requires students to give both the supporting points as well as the evidence and so on.



Giving students the opportunity to practice complex tasks under the guidance of their instructors is an important scaffolding tool that allows them to experience some success at each step of the learning process. Some instructors will avoid using this strategy because it requires some extra preparation, or they believe it provides students with unnecessary assistance. Either argument is an unfortunate abdication of the instructors' responsibilities. Students at all levels of schooling have reported that many of their teachers failed to provide opportunities for guided and gradual practice with complex skills, and then these instructors expected immediate understanding. Such expectations often resulted in additional time spent by students in remedial work after marginal work was submitted and returned.

Teaching Innovations: Setting Assignments

The Debate Page Assignment

Consider structuring an assignment in your course as a Debate Page. Using the format of an Editorial Page in a newspaper you will:

- A. Select an issue to be debated.
- B. Write two essays that take opposing views regarding the issue. These essays are meant to be persuasive and must show evidence that you have consulted the relevant literature. Follow the usual conventions for citations.
- C. Create five commentaries each from a different theoretical perspective. I will give further instructions about how to focus these commentaries.
- D. Conduct five brief interviews with people to obtain their perspectives on the issue, summarize their positions and provide one direct quotation from each interview that you feel captures the essence of their remarks.
- E. Create, or find, a political cartoon that provides some perspective on the issue.
- F. You will be asked to present a summation of your work to an audience in the form of a poster board display.

Further guidelines will be distributed to assist you with this assignment.

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