SCAFFOLDED READING INSTRUCTION OF CONTENT-AREA TEXTS

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When Alfred Tatum said that “leveled texts lead to leveled lives” at the 2013 Michigan Reading Association conference, we were shocked. After all, leveled texts have become commonplace. Another shock to our understanding of reading instruction came from Timothy Shanahan, who suggested that the leveling system that most teachers use was “made up” (2011, np). What if the percentages that we use to identify frustrational, instructional, and independent texts were wrong? As documented by Shanahan, Betts (1946) simply estimated the accurate rates required for understanding, suggesting, for example, that students needed to be taught from texts they could read with 95% to 98% oral reading accuracy and with a reading comprehension of 75% to 89%. Others disagreed with these levels and recommended much lower rates of accuracy when instructional scaffolds are provided (e.g., Powell & Dunkeld, 1977).

In fact, there was an unheeded call for evidence to confirm that the criterion used for instructional and independent levels were accurate: “Research is needed to show that using materials at a certain instructional level does indeed bring optimum gains in children’s ready achievement” (Powell & Dunkeld, 1977, p. 641). Citing the assumptions that underpin this leveling system (coupling decoding with comprehension, requiring near-perfect accuracy to advance, and equating oral to silent reading performance), Halladay (2012) cautioned that “teachers need to be aware of the somewhat arbitrary nature of the leveling criteria” (p. 57). What if the leveled texts teachers are using do not require much instruction and thus students fail to extend their reading repertoires? Could it be that instruction with more complex texts would result in improved student achievement?

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Faced with some cognitive dissonance, we thought we had better do some investigating for ourselves. We could not find any compelling studies suggesting that leveled texts beyond the primary years resulted in significant gains in achievement. We did find a lot of articles describing guided reading using leveled texts, but not outcome studies.

Surprisingly, we did find studies suggesting that students learn more when taught with texts that were above their instructional level (Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000). Stahl and Heubach (2005), in their study with second graders, stated, “The results of this study suggest that children can benefit from reading material well below the 95% accuracy rate traditionally recommended for instruction. In fact, students appeared to benefit from reading stories in the first sampling even though they were reading them with an average accuracy rate of 85%, which would be considered frustration level” (p. 54).

We had to ask ourselves, should there be instructional times when students struggle with text? There is evidence that school texts starting in grade 3 have been getting easier (Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996). Have our expectations been lowered? Should we focus on scaffolding of complex texts rather than leveling texts, especially in content areas such as social studies, science, and art that require complex thinking about information?

Inviting the Struggle
The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts included a game changer that has implications for all of the other standards: Anchor Standard 10 on text complexity. Its seemingly simple message—“to read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 10)—has proven to be difficult mainly because the supporting documents have defined for the first time what grade-level texts actually are. Gone are the days when teachers and curriculum writers could determine grade-level appropriate texts. The Common Core State Standards define appropriate quantitative levels for grade-level difficulty and acknowledge that qualitative factors, such as levels of meaning, text structure, language conventions, and knowledge demands, should be used to place texts within a grade as well as to identify teaching points.

Interestingly, the expectation that students read and understand increasingly complex informational text is not limited to states directly affected by the standards. Conversations about increasing expectations for readers, especially in the area of informational text, are occurring around the world. For example, the Reading to Learn project in Australia focuses on students’ access of complex text (Rose & Martin, 2012).

“Should there be instructional times when students struggle with text?”

Teachers everywhere are increasingly expected to support students as they progress through increasing levels of text complexity.

The issue of raised expectations for students has distinct implications as it relates to teaching with and about content-area informational texts. The Common Core State Standards emphasize knowledge building through language and literacy, and texts about the physical, biological, and social worlds are the premier source. As well, there has been laudable attention to the issue of increasing exposure to informational texts upon entry to school (Duke, 2001).

However, the practice of limiting access to complex texts is built on a shaky foundation that may oversimplify what readers are able to do even when decoding accuracy and comprehension are not nearly perfect. As well, instruction with leveled texts for older readers assumes that the text should serve as the primary scaffold, even in the presence of a skilled teacher working in an ideal teaching arrangement—the small group—which is a prominent feature of guided reading instruction. This raised another question for us: Shouldn’t the teacher, rather than the text, serve as the primary source of scaffolds?

Instruction of Complex Informational Texts
Teaching students to read and understand complex informational text
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requires a wide range of instructional routines. Teachers should read aloud to students, modeling their thinking about such things as text structure, word solving, and comprehension strategies so that skills are built and habits are formed (Regan & Berkeley, 2012). Students should be expected to read widely from texts that they want to read, building their background knowledge and vocabularies while developing morally, emotionally, and intellectually (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). And students should read collaboratively with their peers, discussing the information found in the texts that they read (Clark et al., 2003). These are common practices that will serve students well as new expectations for text complexity are implemented. It cannot be overemphasized—learners need a host of experiences with rich informational texts and a sliding scale of scaffolds and supports to access the information contained within them.

Close reading is a comparatively newer instructional practice in K–12, although it has long been used at the college level. The intent of this analytical reading approach is to promote careful inspection of complex, rather than leveled, text to extract meaning, build knowledge, draw conclusions, and formulate arguments that are supported by textual evidence. Close reading, which is often done with the entire class, relies on a degree of scaffolding, especially through the use of repeated readings, text-dependent questions, annotation, and extended discussion (Fisher & Frey, 2012).

However, teachers can unintentionally create a major gap in supporting the learning of students if a close reading is followed with small-group instruction with leveled texts. During close reading students engage with a complex piece of informational text. But in conventional small-group reading instruction, the text is selected to match the reader, often applying the questionable decision-making model suggested by Betts (1946). There is nothing sudden about this release of responsibility; instead students fail to develop the habits necessary to access complex text from the very structure that was intended to provide that access. The gradual release of responsibility framework suggests that the process is more intentional. Having implemented close reading, we have been asking ourselves: Where is the opportunity for students to work through a challenging piece of informational text while benefiting from intensive teacher contact? In other words, can we level up the text during small-group, scaffolded reading instruction?

Level Up During Scaffolded Reading Instruction

Scaffolded reading is an important component of the reading instructional day, as it affords teachers time to observe and interact with a small group of students for an extended period of time (usually 20–30 minutes). This may be the most valuable real estate in the school day, as teachers can attest to the limited opportunities to customize instruction to address the needs of an individual student. A small-group reading arrangement such as this further provides students and the teacher with the opportunity to talk about the learning, especially to pose questions, engage in speculation, support and challenge claims, and draw conclusions.

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So doesn’t it follow that this is exactly the time to ramp up the complexity level of an informational text? Keep in mind that the central practice of guided instruction is to provide scaffolds as needed in the form of questions to check for understanding, prompts to trigger cognitive and metacognitive thinking, and cues to shift attention to salient information when the prompts are insufficient (Fisher & Frey, 2010). The opportunity to closely observe students in the act of reading and thinking is still there. However, we believe there is value in observing what a learner does when confronted with informational text that challenges his or her thinking, and not just his or her ability to decode and comprehend at a surface level. We want to watch how students construct knowledge and schema, as this is the linchpin for reading analytically.

This is not to say that the sky is the limit and that every child should be able to read any text given the proper teacher scaffolding. Scaffolded reading is a time to stretch students to grapple with text that is more difficult than they can access on their own. This principle of scaffolding is at the heart of Vygotskian pedagogy. Reasoned selection of informational text should involve consideration of the content, the process students will engage in to interact with the content, and the product that will result (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

These principles of differentiated instruction provide a decision-making framework for adjusting each to stretch,
but not break, learners. They also make it clear to us that the text alone doesn’t need to be the only instrument of differentiation. Fourth-grade students learning about electricity aren’t expected to read Electrical Principles and Theoretical Constructs (we made that title up). But The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2012) can offer them a suitably challenging read that extends their vocabulary, critical thinking skills, and scientific understanding. By attending to the type and number of scaffolds needed (process), an observant teacher can make decisions about products, instead of simply discarding the text in favor of an easier one (content).

There are at least three ways to scaffold reading instruction with complex informational texts: as an extension of a close reading, as a preview for later reading, or as an opportunity to address the skill needs of specific students.

Sometimes, scaffolded small-group reading instruction is used as an extension of the close reading students have done. For example, after a close reading of the Silly Putty chapter from the book Toys! Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions (Wulffson, 2000), fourth-grade teacher Marla Henderson met with small groups of students and guided their development of text-dependent questions. Her class had already learned a great deal about questioning, including the relationship between questions and answers (Raphael & Au, 2005), and her scaffolded reading instruction focused on students reading at or above grade level so that they could develop questions they could use in their collaborative discussions with their peers. For example, Devon said that they should ask about the text structure, saying “The structure is chronological and that’s important because each step was important for the invention. We should ask a question about that so that we reread the text looking for all of the events that created Silly Putty.” Alea added, “And we should ask about the roles that different people had because each person is important in the success of Silly Putty.”

At other times, scaffolded small-group reading instruction is used to prepare students for close reading or collaborative reading tasks. In his fifth-grade class, Bart Hopple meets with small groups of students, scaffolding their reading with a text that serves to build students’ knowledge for the reciprocal teaching they will do with primary source documents. With a group of students who perform below grade level, Mr. Hopple used a complex text (810L), The History of US (Hakim, 2005), to guide their thinking. As they read and discussed the chapter “Plains Indians are not Plain at All,” Mr. Hopple asked students to describe the living conditions of the Plains Indians and discuss their traditions and beliefs and the changes these people experienced over time. As Seyo says, “They used to be poor, but when they traded buffalo skins for guns, they could get more food and live better.” Arturo adds, “Yeah, and then they didn’t farm so much because they could live on the buffalo. Their way of life changed a lot.”

Scaffolded, small-group reading instruction can also be used to address the assessed needs of specific students. For example, sixth-grade science teacher Jorge Cabrera noticed that there were several students still having difficulty with comparing and contrasting. He met with them to provide scaffolded reading instruction. In this case, he used a selection from a science textbook, specifically a section about three major rock types. He asked the students to read the first section, focused on igneous rocks. When they finished the couple of paragraphs, he asked them to discuss the text and summarize their discussion on a compare and contrast graphic organizer. He noted that his students were able to do this successfully. The students were then asked to read the section on sedimentary rocks, which they did.

Then Mr. Cabrera asked them to update their graphic organizers before talking with their peers. They had difficulty with the similarities, but successfully identified a number of differences. He focused their conversation on the ways that these two types of rocks were similar. As he noted, “Remember we have to both compare and contrast, meaning that we have to think about how two things are similar and how they are different. Let’s focus for now on the similarities. Let’s look back at the text and see what we can find.” This process continued, as students read a complex piece of text, with the support of their teacher, practicing the skill that they needed to develop.

Using Small-Group Scaffolded Reading Instruction Wisely

Our review of the research, not to mention our direct experiences, suggests that instruction with leveled informational text beyond the primary grades has not paid the dividends promised. As
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students are learning to read, practice with highly decodable books filled with high-frequency words, sight words, and patterns is important so that students develop automaticity (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, the practice of routinely using leveled texts with students in the upper grades has been problematic, and there are far too many students who are in leveled texts all the way through school, until they drop out. We can change that.

But we’re not suggesting that everything change. Implementation of the Common Core State Standards continues to require expert teacher modeling, small-group instruction, formative assessments, and attention to all aspects of literacy (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension).

It’s just that small-group scaffolded reading instruction should not rely on the text as a primary scaffold. With the new emphasis on text complexity, all students should have access to complex informational texts and opportunity to learn with texts beyond what we have incorrectly considered their instructional level. It’s time to ramp up the text complexity levels as part of the scaffolded instruction that teachers provide. Hopefully, this will allow for increased expectations for students’ such that they think critically about the information contained in the texts they read. When that is done, students will no longer be sentenced to reading texts that are far below their grade level, essentially independently, in the presence of their teacher. Instead, the teacher will serve as a primary scaffold, assisting students up the staircase of informational text complexity.

REFERENCES


LITERATURE CITED

