


Chapter 11

Use of Scaffolding to Promote Engagement and Learning in Asynchronous Online Discussions

Linda Clark Ashar

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1877-5916>

American Public University System, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter per the author proposes scaffolding as a best practice methodology for encouraging student learning and engagement in asynchronous discussions in the online higher education classroom. Grounded in Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and developmental theories that followed, scaffolding techniques harmonize with fundamental learning theories and practices, such as the tripartite Community of Inquiry framework of social, teaching, and cognitive presence. This chapter explains the value of scaffolding as supported by relevant research, and offers illustrative examples of the use of scaffolding to promote engagement and learning in online asynchronous discussions.

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THE USE OF SCAFFOLDING TO PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING IN ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Organized distance learning as it is conceived today can be traced back to at least 1728, when a pioneering entrepreneur named Caleb Phillips set up his successful shorthand-by-mail school out of Boston, Massachusetts Colony (Barrett & Ashar, 2024; Bozkurt, 2019). The growth of alternatives to live classrooms has not waned since. Entrepreneurial acumen and advancing technology have collaborated over the nearly 300 years since Caleb's day to bring the remote classroom paradigm into mainstream education worldwide. This trend was accelerated by the stay-in-place mandates of the COVID-19 pandemic, thrusting traditional brick-and-mortar institutions into an expanded virtual learning world (Nworie, 2021). Today, more than 180 million people are said to be engaged in online education ("The History of Distance Learning," 2024).

Beetham and Sharpe (2019) emphasized that a modern understanding of pedagogy is to recognize it is "an essential dialogue between teaching and learning: learning in the context of teaching, and teaching that has learning as its goal" (p. 2). With the growth of remote learning came the need to adapt pedagogy to overcome the nonsocial nature of the impersonal dynamic that is inherent in the lack of face-to-face interaction in real time between teacher and student, as well as among students in online peer discussions (Delahunty, 2018; Swan, 2017). The antidote for this problem is social presence (Swan, 2017), a key element of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework heralded in established research (Anderson, 2017; Avcı & Ergulac, 2019; Garrison et al., 1999; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Swan & Richardson, 2017). According to the CoI theory, social, teaching, and cognitive presence combine to simulate the energy of a live classroom (The Community of Inquiry, 2024). These concepts refine a universal truth about learning: the intrinsic occurrence of communication in the learner's outward interaction with others and the environment (Andreev, 2024; Schunk, 2012).

CoI and related pedagogical theories are rooted in Russian psychologist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), a cornerstone of his sociocultural theory of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky built his theory on his profound insights into how learning and cognitive development are intertwined with experience and communication in social contexts and the observation that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Levykh (2008) explained that educators can design learning activities in a "guided construction" to bridge Vygotsky's ZPD. Such "guided construction" of ZPD perfectly describes an educative process called scaffolding, by which a learner is provided assistance to "solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal" (Bakker et al., 2015, p. 1048) that the learner cannot do independently (Wood et

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