



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures)

# Learner agency in scaffolding: The case of coaching teacher leadership

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## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Scaffolding  
Agency  
Learning on the job  
Coaching  
Teacher leadership  
Linguistic ethnography

## ABSTRACT

This case study investigates the agency exercised by a teacher team coordinator in shaping the scaffolding she received from her coach while jointly leading teacher team meetings. We used linguistic ethnographic methods to examine 14 teacher meetings. Detailed analysis of four episodes is used to probe the ways in which the coordinator requested, resisted or negotiated the type and timing of her coach's scaffolding support. We analyze the conditions that enabled the coordinator's agency, among them that the coaching interactions were situated in the joint engagement in professional work. Playing multiple roles created opportunities and obligations for the coordinator to be agentive in accomplishing her work and therefore in co-constructing the scaffolding interactions.

## 1. Introduction

Just as history is written by the victors, accounts of scaffolding are typically told from the scaffolding teacher's perspective. Often, in scaffolding research, the spotlight is on the expert (i.e., the teacher, or the parent), her actions and their effects on the learner. Scaffolding is usually viewed as the aid the expert provides, the ways s/he adjusts this aid to the learner's zone of proximal development, and the ways s/he gradually withdraws this aid, transferring responsibility to the learner (van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). While scholars have considered how *experts* adjust their support to the learner's developing needs (Tabak, 2004; Wood & Wood, 1996b), as well as the interpersonal dynamics in scaffolding (Stone, 1993; Tabak & Baumgartner, 2004), the *learner* is seldom viewed as an active agent in the scaffolding process (Elbers, 1996; Searle, 1984). In this study, we propose to expand our gaze from mainly focusing on the expert, to also consider the learner's agency, defined as her socioculturally mediated capacity to shape the teacher's support (Ahearn, 2001).

We examine agency in scaffolding in a context similar to classic apprenticeship: a coach and teacher team coordinator jointly leading team meetings. In these meetings, the coach not only supports the coordinator but also participates in discussions together with the teachers on the team, who are not concerned with the coordinator's learning. Thus, unlike many other scaffolding studies, here the primary goal is the task itself: facilitating a collaborative professional discussion. The goal of developing the coordinator competence is subordinated to this task. This context is unique also inasmuch as, relative to teacher-student or parent-child relations, the coach-coordinator relationship is more symmetrical: both are adults, both share responsibility for the team meetings, both may view the interaction as part of their own learning processes. In this context, we investigate how the coordinator and coach jointly construct their roles and relationship, focusing in particular on events in which the coordinator exercises agency in shaping the coach's support.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.11.002>

Received 12 May 2017; Received in revised form 22 September 2017; Accepted 5 November 2017  
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## 2. Scaffolding teacher learning in professional practice

Scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) is an instructional approach in which learners learn by performing complex tasks that are outside their current range of independent performance. Mentors, or teachers, model ideal performance and augment learners' knowledge and skills by providing prompts, feedback, or by taking over some aspects of the task. These actions enable learners to complete these tasks, despite their not yet having full command of the requisite knowledge and skills (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Davis & Miyake, 2004; Greenfield, 1984; Reiser & Tabak, 2014; Rogoff, 1990; Wood & Wood, 1996a; van de Pol et al., 2010). Over time, this support is gradually removed, or faded. This variable provision of support, contingent instruction (Wood & Wood, 1996a), is dependent on the learners' changing levels of competency.

Contingent instruction can be an elusive pedagogical construct (Stone, 1998). On one hand, contingent instruction operates on two straightforward principles (Wood & Wood, 1996a): (1) offering greater guidance when learners experience difficulty; and (2) offering less guidance when learners show proficiency (fading). These principles have been specified for particular learning situations, and teachers have been able to effectively take up these rules and support learners (Azevedo, Cromley, Moos, Greene, & Winters, 2011; van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2012; van de Pol, Volman, Oort, & Beishuizen, 2014). On the other hand, in the absence of such specification, or when learners devise strategies that significantly depart from the teacher's expectations (Wood, 2001), it is often difficult for teachers to provide tailored support purposefully and systematically. In particular, gauging learners' competence can be difficult, and instructors may provide too little or too much support (Gutiérrez & Stone, 2002; Wood & Wood, 1996).

Scaffolding is relevant to teacher learning through professional activity (Gaffney & Anderson, 1991; Wilkinson & Gaffney, 2016). It is a central tool for supporting learning "on the job" (e.g., Hutchins, 1996), such as in the context of teacher collaborative teams (Horn, Garner, Kane, & Brasel, 2017), or, as is our focus here, coaching a teacher team coordinator through co-facilitation of teacher team meetings.

### 2.1. How scaffolding advances professional learning

In learning through practice, or "on the job," learners are continually exposed to complete cycles of authentic activity. This enables them to observe individuals with different levels of experience conducting the work practices that the learners are expected to eventually take up. Unlike teacher-student or adult-child scaffolding interactions, in these settings, the distinction between learner and non-learner can be subtle, with participants fulfilling roles along a spectrum of peripheral and central participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). While some professional settings do maintain formal recognition of initiates, and establish explicit structures to move these initiates to more central forms of participation (Hutchins, 1996), others maintain more informal and dynamic processes. For example, the apprenticeship process in the U.S. navy is relatively structured (Hutchins, 1996). Initially, naval navigator initiates may be assigned as an apprentice in navigational tasks, such as taking bearings: first observing the task, then performing under supervision, and eventually performing independently. In professional settings, where scaffolding occurs through regular "on the job activities," learning is characterized by high levels of joint activity between the learner and the mentor, and the learner and other participants, so that learners are not only learning how to perform specific tasks, but also how to assist and coordinate activities with others (Seifert & Hutchins, 1992).

When learning takes place through practice in professional settings, the primary object of activity (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) is accomplishing work, rather than learning (or teaching). This has consequences for the way learning and scaffolding unfold. For example, the mentor's attention may be focused on avoiding errors (Greenfield, 2000), or on fixing errors (Seifert & Hutchins, 1992), rather than on gauging learners' competence or providing explanations or rationale for actions. In some cases, mentors animate learners through the actions needed to accomplish the task, by physically orienting their body and manipulating their hand movements (Greenfield, 1984; Hutchins, 1996). This does not necessarily mean that learning through scaffolding in professional settings is less effective. Traditional apprenticeships seem to produce effective tailors, midwives, and other practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although apprenticeship seems to focus on accomplishing the task, while formal education seems to focus on developing the learner, apprenticeship may effectively help learners develop knowledge and skills, in part because apprenticeships often take place over months and years of relatively similar and repeated tasks, compensating for this difference in focus. In contrast, in formal schooling, often only a few hours are devoted to specific topics and skills.

One key function of scaffolding is to help learners develop a representation of the sequence of actions involved in a task, and to acquire the ability to coordinate these actions and regulate effort (Rogoff, 1990; Wood et al., 1976). This is often accomplished through other-regulation, where mentors ask guiding questions that sequence and prompt learner actions (Mercer, 1995; Wertsch, 1979). Similarly, practitioner-learners need to take up work practices by learning how to coordinate a series of actions in ways that conform to the goals and values of the local setting (Wenger, 1998). For example, when a novice naval navigator needed to fill in a report form, he did not know how to translate the information requested in the form into a sequence of reading gauges and charts on the ship, despite knowing how to perform the requisite readings (Hutchins, 1996). The more senior crew member, the mentor, directed his activity by asking "What's our checking head?" and "What's the table deviation for 074?" In responding to these questions, the novice not only gains practice in reading the gauges, but constructs knowledge of the task structure, and an understanding of the canonical representations (report forms) of this work environment (Wenger, 1998). As the navigator gains competence he will complete the report form independently, performing himself the directing actions previously performed by the mentor (Hutchins, 1996). In this learning process, in addition to the mentor's scaffolding, the report form provides support on its own, which may sustain even after the mentor withdraws. Similarly, in leading a team meeting, a coach might raise guiding questions to the

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