

Removing scaffolding – Secondary history

By Alex Fairlamb

One example of when I used scaffolding and then gradually removed it was when I tasked my pupils with answering a source utility question. This is one of the more complex History skills as it requires pupils to study sources and determine how useful they are for a given enquiry by evaluating their content and source. Therefore, I scaffolded learning by first modelling how to approach answering a question like this and then gradually removed this scaffold throughout the lesson.

To begin with, I broke down the question for them into its component parts by using a technique called ‘RUSS the question’ – ‘Read it, underline it, summarise it, then solve it.’ I then began to use ‘Think Aloud’ to model unpacking what the question is asking. For example, by saying “What does ‘How’ mean – I know from previous lessons that it means you’re required to give a judgement.”

I then began to model how to structure the response. First of all, I modelled checking the question and mapping out where the different components would appear in my answer by saying things like:

“What are the key words in the question? What do those key words mean and what therefore is the question asking me to do? I’m going to now summarise the question by making a checklist for this question so that I can ensure that I have included everything that it is asking of me – I must include: three paragraphs, evidence from my own knowledge and I must include explanation.”

After this, I began to model completing the task, demonstrating my metacognition by thinking aloud what I was doing, how and why. During this stage of the lesson, I began to remove scaffolding and support by asking pupils to contribute as I modelled completing the task. This enabled me to guide and support their responses. Once I felt pupils were secure in their understanding of how to answer this question, I tasked pupils with independent practice.

For the independent practice, I provided pupils with a partially completed example to continue to scaffold their responses. This further reinforced their understanding of the different elements of the question and ensured their thinking was focused around the key learning points.

So throughout the lesson, I gradually removed the scaffold of teacher support to increase pupil independence. During independent practice, pupils were not expected to work entirely without scaffolds and instead were given a partially completed example because I knew they would require some form of support. However, over time, depending on the pupil and their progress, I began to remove scaffolds for source utility questions. I began by transitioning from a partially completed example to using checklists to support and prompt pupil’s cognitive and metacognitive processes. Once pupils had internalised the structure and processes involved, I was able to remove the checklists entirely. The speed at which this was done varied for different pupils to suit their differing needs. To further support pupil independence, I ensure I consistently use the same structures when answering questions.



I always challenge pupils to progress to independence - the scaffolding must begin to come down at some point - but when appropriate. Don't be fearful to put scaffolds back into place if errors are made and it is required.