

The Release of Learning

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preview

Successful instruction gradually transfers responsibility for learning from teachers to students.

Focus lessons, guided instruction, collaborative tasks, and independent learning facilitate the release of responsibility.

A three-process feedback model guides teachers as they implement the instructional strategies.

Principals are among the most important players in improving student achievement from year to year. What a teacher actually does in the classroom is important in terms of student achievement, but it is the principal who guides teachers to improved practice.

Although any number of instructional frameworks are useful in improving student achievement, our work has focused on the gradual release of responsibility. An optimal outcome of instruction is that students can independently apply what they have learned in unique situations. To ensure this, classrooms must be structured to purposefully and intentionally guide students toward mastery. Therefore, teachers must be acutely aware of the instructional moves that build student confidence and competence. And principals are key to making this happen.

If the principal is an instructional leader, it seems reasonable for him or her to focus on classroom observations and feedback systems. But simply being in a classroom and seeing students at work will not change teacher behavior or student learning. Principals must know what to look for in a classroom and how to scaffold and guide teachers in implementing quality instruction.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility

The thinking behind the gradual release of responsibility is that teachers must plan to move from providing extensive support to peer support to no support. Or as Duke and Pearson (2002) suggested, teachers have to move from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task...to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility" (p. 211). Unfortunately, in too many classrooms releasing responsibility is too sudden and unplanned and results in misunderstandings and failure. Consider the classroom in which students hear a lecture and are then expected to pass a test. Or the classroom in which students are told to read texts at home and come to class prepared to discuss them. Or the classroom in which students are assigned a problem set 20 minutes after the teacher has demonstrated how to do the problems. In each of these cases, students were expected to perform independently but were not well prepared for the task.



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Our interpretation of the **gradual release of responsibility** model includes four components: focus lessons, guided instruction, collaborative tasks, and independent learning (Fisher & Frey, 2008). The work we've done over the past eight years suggests that implementation of this instruction framework leads to significant improvement in student engagement and achievement. Having said that, we also want to emphasize that this is not a linear process and that teachers can implement the components in ways that are effective for their outcomes. Our criteria, however, are that all four are present each time students and teachers meet. (See figure 1 for a list of things to look for in a classroom using this framework.)



Focus lesson. A typical focus lesson lasts between 10 and 15 minutes. It's designed to do two things: establish a purpose and provide students with a model. Often the purpose is written on the board and briefly discussed with students. Some teachers require that students include the purpose in their notes. Others make a verbal reference to the purpose several times during the class meeting. We aren't too concerned with where and how the purpose is listed, but rather that the students know what is expected of them and why they're learning what they're learning.

The second part of the focus lesson is the model. Although volumes can and have been written on modeling, it's rarely done in the secondary classroom. Instead, middle level and high school teachers provide procedural explanations that emphasize the how, but not the why. Modeling, on the other hand, is metacognitive and includes the thinking behind the thinking. When students get a glimpse of the thinking of an expert, they begin to approximate it. Imagine the science student who gets to hear her teacher's understanding of an atom or the history student who witnesses the internal debate his history teacher has about sources of information. Models give students access to academic language and academic thinking as well as information about expert problem solving and understanding. Daily modeling is essential if students are going to understand complex content.

Guided instruction. Having a purpose and a model is not enough to ensure enduring understanding. Learners also need to be guided in their thinking with the strategic use of cues, prompts, or questions that get them to do some of the cognitive work. Guided instruction is intended to result in greater student understanding and is not simply a restatement of the information that the teacher provided

during a focus lesson. Guided instructional events, whether with the whole class or small groups of students, are planned strategically so that teachers understand student thinking and can provide a precise scaffold. Breakthrough learning occurs when teachers increase precision.

Unfortunately, as Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) point out, prescriptive teaching and not precision teaching is taking hold in our classrooms. Because students are not achieving, teachers receive scripts to follow. Too often, those scripts do not allow for a gradual release of responsibility because they cannot account for the vast range of individual differences and needs found in today's classroom.

Collaborative tasks. To learn, to really learn, students must be engaged in productive group tasks that require interaction. They have to use the language and replicate the thinking of the discipline with their peers to really grasp it. And they have to be accountable for their individual contributions to the group task so that the teacher knows which students understand the content and which need additional instruction. There are any number of collaborative tasks that are effective, including:

- Collaborative posters on which each member of the group contributes using a different color marker
- Reciprocal teaching in which each member of the group is responsible for one aspect of comprehension (predicting, questioning, summarizing, and clarifying)
- Word cards that require students to agree on a definition and for which each student develops his or her own example
- Shared writing in which students continue the response started by another member of the group.

Regardless of the instructional routine used for collaborative tasks, there are two keys to making this component effective. First, it must give students an opportunity to interact with one another using the language and content of the discipline. And second, students must be individually accountable for their contributions to the group. Together, these two factors increase engagement and provide teachers with formative assessment information that is useful in planning future instruction.

Independent learning. As part of instruction, students must apply what they have been taught. Ideally, this occurs under the teacher's guidance during class time before homework is ever assigned. There are a number of in-class independent tasks that help students master content. For

Observing

Figure 1

Observing a Gradual Release of Responsibility Lesson

Focus Lessons

- The teacher uses “I” statements to model thinking.
- Questioning is used to scaffold instruction, not to interrogate students.
- The lesson includes a decision frame for when to use the skill or the strategy.
- The lesson builds metacognitive awareness, especially indicators of success.
- Focus lessons give way to guided instruction, not immediately to independent learning.

Guided Instruction

- Small group arrangements are evident.
- Grouping changes throughout the semester.
- The teacher has an active role in guided instruction and doesn’t simply circulate and help individual students.
- There is a dialogue between learners and the teacher as they begin to apply the skill or strategy.
- The teacher uses cues and prompts to scaffold understanding when a student makes an error and does not immediately tell the student the correct answer.

Collaborative Learning

- Small group arrangements are evident.
- Grouping changes throughout the semester.
- The concepts students need to understand to complete collaborative tasks have been modeled by the teacher.
- Students have received guided instruction of the concepts they need to complete collaborative tasks.
- Students are individually accountable for their contributions to the group.
- Tasks give students opportunities to interact with one another.

Independent Learning

- Students have received modeled, guided, and collaborative learning experiences that relate to concepts they need to complete independent tasks.
- Independent tasks extend beyond practice to application and extension of new knowledge.
- The teacher meets with individual students for conferencing about the independent learning tasks.

Source: Adapted from Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). *Better learning through structured teaching: A framework for the gradual release of responsibility*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

example, “quickwrites” allow students to clarify their thinking on a subject. They also provide a glimpse into student understanding. Out-of-class independent learning—homework—should be saved until students have a firm grasp of the content. Simply said, students need practice before being asked to complete tasks completely on their own.

In many classrooms, however, students are assigned tasks for homework on material or skills that have not yet been taught. As the MetLife (2008) survey documented, secondary teachers confessed that they “very often or often” assigned homework because they ran out of time in class. The practice of assigning homework for missed class content will not result in student understanding. In fact, it is more likely to reinforce misunderstanding because in many cases students are practicing ineffectively and incorrectly.

So I See, Now What?

As we have noted, conducting classroom observations is part of the equation necessary for improvement. Knowing what to look for is also necessary if classroom observations are to be meaningful. In other words, principals need a clearly articulated vision for the instruction they expect to see. Teachers should be engaged in a gradual release of responsibility so that students are apprenticed in disciplinary thinking and academic language.

But even this second factor is not enough to create change. In addition to spending time in classrooms and knowing what to look for, principals must coach teachers in continual improvement (and principals should be coached by others as well). In our leadership roles, we are particularly taken with the thinking of Hattie and Timperley (2007) and their conceptualization of feedback as three processes: feed up, feed back, and feed forward. Although they focused their work on student learning through feedback, we have applied it to our work in teacher professional development.

Feed up. The first process focuses on learning goals, which need to be agreed upon if change is going to happen. When the teacher does not agree with the principal about a learning goal, the second process, feedback, is likely to be ignored. When the learning goal does not relate to some aspect of quality instruction, time is wasted. Our experiences suggest that feed up and the conversation surrounding learning goals are essential if change is the goal. And parenthetically, we believe that every teacher, ourselves included, can improve his or her practice. Just a few years ago, Doug had a learning goal to model his thinking aloud using text features (e.g., headings, graphs, charts, tables, etc.). Doug

knew that he had developed a repertoire of modeling, but also understood that it could improve.

When teachers have learning goals that they have collaboratively identified and agree with, change is within reach. One of the teachers we support rarely used collaborative tasks. Her students were engaged, but not interacting. We had the opportunity to talk with her about the value of interaction and how learners must use language to learn. Although it took several discussions over several weeks, we did agree on a learning goal: at least 10 minutes each period will be devoted to productive group work in which students will interact with their peers. If we had simply assigned this learning goal to our colleague, we are sure that she would have argued that the students in her class were learning enough and that they were always well behaved.

Feed back. Most of us are most familiar with the second process, which involves providing information or data to the teacher regarding the learning goal. Focusing on the data allows the principal to depersonalize feedback. Noting both successes and challenges is important. Of course, this information isn't always welcome. In the case of the teacher working on interaction, the feedback we provided was based on our observations as well as reports from students. Sometimes students would excitedly report that they "got to work done" in the classroom, which we would tell the teacher. Other times, we'd observe students sitting at desks listening to their teacher for extended periods of time. Once we reported the number of minutes students went between interactions, resulting in some initial defensiveness from her. In response, we said that we weren't there to tell her how to structure the time, but rather to help her reflect on how she was using the limited amount of time she had to develop student understanding.

Feed forward. The final process in the model outlined by Hattie and Timperley (2007) shifts the conversation to the future. This shift is key. We have provided feedback to teachers for years, but shifting to feed forward has allowed us to plan alongside teachers on the basis of the learning goal and the information we have collected. This process is much less evaluative and more collaborative than the feedback process. In fact, teachers often report that the feed forward process puts the principal on the side of the teacher because both are invested in the success of the lesson. And this is where change happens. During the feed forward conversation, the principal and the teacher talk about *what's*

next and *what if*. Principals should encourage teachers to try things out, to experiment, and to think deeply about what works and what doesn't work.



During a feed forward conversation with the teacher who was focused on improving student interaction, we learned that she wanted to experiment with a grouping structure but wasn't comfortable doing so with her own students. When asked why, she answered, "I think I don't try these things out because I'm afraid of failing in front of my students." We suggested that she teach some classes of students whom she didn't know, which helped her increase the number of peer-to-peer interactions in her classroom.

So, What Does It Take?

Releasing responsibility to students is not easy. Finding the time to spend in classrooms is difficult. So is having honest conversations with teachers about instruction, especially when students appear engaged and the teacher seems to have things under control. But the high expectations that educators and the community have for students will not be realized unless every instructional minute is purposeful and designed to increase student independence. There are no shortcuts, just systems that teachers and principals can put in place to maximize learning. **PL**

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