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Organize Your Instruction through Gradual Release of Responsibility

GRADE LEVELS: K–12

What Is It?

Organizing instruction using a gradual release of responsibility model allows teachers to intentionally plan to move from providing extensive support to allowing students to be supported by peers before completing tasks independently with no teacher support (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Or as Duke and Pearson (2002) suggest, 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). This principle guides effective instruction regardless of grade level or content because it echoes what Good and Brophy (2003) call "active teaching." Active teaching is the ability of an educator to present information to learners in ways that are effective and do not waste the students' time. When learners are in the presence of someone who has mastered active teaching, they (Fisher & Frey, 2008):

- Understand the purpose of the lesson.
- See the skill or strategy modeled.
- Practice it under the guidance of the teacher.
- Consolidate understanding with peers.
- Practice independently.

The format can be easily captured in these memorable statements:

I do it. (Modeling)
We do it. (Guided Instruction)
You do it together. (Collaborative Learning)
You do it alone. (Independent Tasks)

What Do I Do?

Modeling: I Do It

In the first phase of the lesson, the teacher explains the purpose of the lesson and models the instructional task while students watch closely. Whether the skill being taught is to locate the main idea in a paragraph, throw a wedged ball of clay onto a potter's wheel, or complete a quadratic formula, the first step of good instruction is an expert showing the apprentices how it's done (see Figure 1.1 for a map of how these three lessons are taught using this framework). During this time teachers may use a think-aloud strategy (Davey, 1983) by vocalizing the thinking processes they are using as they complete the task, in particular how they make decisions related to

Task / Lesson Phase	Find the Main Idea	Throw a Pot	Complete a Quadratic Equation
Modeling: I do it.	Teacher locates main idea in a paragraph projected on the overhead and discusses why. A think-aloud strategy is employed so students can gain insight into a reader's decision- making process.	Teacher is seated at a potter's wheel and explains the techniques for locating the center of a spinning wheel while demonstrating. A think-aloud strategy is employed so students can gain insight into a potter's decision-making process.	Teacher demonstrates technique for moving the constant in an equation and completing the square to solve. A think-aloud strategy is employed so students can gain insight into a mathematician's problem-solving process.
Guided Instruction: We do it together.	Teacher meets with small groups to coach them through a problem and uses prompts and cues to resolve confusing parts.	Teacher meets with small groups to coach them through a problem and uses prompts and cues to resolve confusing parts.	Teacher meets with small groups to coach them through a problem and uses prompts and cues to resolve confusing parts.
Collaborative Learning: You do it together.	Students work in pairs with a common text to find the main idea together.	Students work in pairs, taking turns at a wheel while one throws the clay and the other closely observes and gives feedback.	Students work in pairs to solve another quadratic equation together.
Independent Tasks: You do it alone.	Students read a series of paragraphs and locate the main ideas independently. Teacher circulates, assists, and monitors.	Students work at their own wheel to successfully throw the clay on the pot and center it. Teacher circulates, assists, and monitors.	Students work their own quadratic equation problem. Teacher circulates, assists, and monitors.

FIGURE 1.1. Gradual release of responsibility framework.

their understanding of the task. This modeling procedure may be repeated several times as the teacher gauges the level of questions generated by the students. When a sufficient level of understanding has been reached by the group, the lesson moves to the next phase.

Guided Instruction: We Do It

Once students have had the opportunity to watch a teacher complete the operation several times and ask clarifying questions about it, they are now ready to assume shared responsibility for the task with the teacher. This is a critical phase of the lesson and skipping it is bound to result in errors, frustration, and classroom management problems. This is the guided instruction all learners require as they add a new skill or strategy to their repertoire—a chance to practice the task while a more knowledgeable adult is close by to shape their attempts and prevent predictable mistakes. Typically a teacher in the "we do it" phase of the lesson will pose a short example of the task to pairs or small groups of students and then coach them as they work on it. This allows the learners to use one another as well as the teacher as a source for information. Along the way, the teacher provides prompts and cues to transfer responsibility to the students. For example, when given a sample quadratic problem, the teacher observes as students begin working. As they get stuck, the teacher prompts (e.g., "Did you remember problem number 4 and what you did there?") and cues (e.g., "Look again at the figure on page 145") such that the student is able to experience success based on the coaching provided by the teacher.

Collaborative Learning: You Do It Together

In this phase, the teacher steps aside and provides students, working in groups, with a task that allows them to consolidate their understanding. The key to collaborative learning is accountability. Each student in the group is accountable, individually, based on what the group is working on together. In addition, collaborative learning is a time in which students talk with one another using academic language. They need to practice the thinking and language presented in the lesson if they are to become proficient users of that language. For example, if the task is to throw clay on a potter's wheel to create a vase, pairs of students may take turns working at the same wheel, alternating in the role of potter and observer. They provide each other with feedback on what seems to be working and what does not. At the end of the lesson, each student has produced a vase, with the support of a peer. As a by-product, they've talked a lot about the production of the vase and have incorporated the academic language of the content area into their thinking.

Independent Tasks: You Do It Alone

At this point in the lesson, students have had a chance to watch a proficient practitioner demonstrate the task while sharing his or her decision-making processes

to successfully complete the task. Next, students try on the task themselves while a peer offers support and feedback. As part of the guided instruction, the teacher provides additional technical feedback when necessary. Now the learners are ready to independently practice the task. While this independent practice often serves as the basis for homework, effective teachers tell us that the task is more likely to be completed if it is partially completed at school. While students are independently practicing the task, the teacher is once again an active participant, circulating and assisting students while monitoring progress. Remember, teaching is a stand-up, walk-around job and your role is to move about the room.

When students are guided through a thoughtful learning process that progressively allows them to take on increasing levels of work, they move smoothly from observer to active participant in the learning process. In addition, the teacher remains actively affiliated with the entire learning cycle, not just the direct instruction phase. By using this lesson frame, students with diverse abilities, skills, and experiences have the opportunity to learn and become more accomplished in academic tasks.

References

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