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Scaffolding functions, actions, means, and intentions

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Wood et al. (1976) used the term “scaffolding” to describe the support given by an adult to a child. Since then, the term has also been used to describe support offered to a novice by a more knowledgeable other. Wood et al. specified scaffolding as consisting of six functions: recruitment, reduction in degrees of freedom, direction maintenance, marking critical features, frustration control, and demonstration. Most work in scaffolding has taken these six functions as definitive/definitional. One example is McCormick and Donato (2000), who look at the questions asked by teachers in university EFL classes and classify those questions according to the six functions.

The authors reexamine McCormick and Donato’s data and suggest that their classifications are questionable and that many of the questions they analyze may actually have multiple functions. They also draw attention to the work of Maryam et al. (2020), who propose eight functions of scaffolding realized through 21 scaffolding actions, such as concretizing and simplifying. The two extra functions proposed are mutual enjoyment and participation in the activity. While the authors suggest that these additional functions are not well-founded, the fact that new functions are still being proposed demonstrates that the precise specification of scaffolding is still an open issue.

We conclude by discussing recent work by van de Pol (2010, 2011, 2013), who examines teacher–student interactions in fine detail from the point of view of contingency, a central notion in distinguishing scaffolding from other kinds of support.

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