Scaffolding morality: Positioning a socio-cultural construct

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Abstract

The concept of scaffolding, as originally introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross [(1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17, 89–100)] and later embedded within Vygotskian theory, has proven to be extremely valuable in its application to educational and psychological theory and practice. In recent years, there have been several attempts to alternatively expand and restrict the terminology and conceptual framework of the scaffolding concept. While movements within the fields of moral development and character education have not yet embraced this socio-cultural concept, it offers a useful tool in justifying and understanding common findings and practices. The character education movement seems particularly well-suited to benefit from scaffolding, within its original socio-cultural framing, in providing an improved understanding of current best practices as well as using the concept as a framework for future research and theoretical direction.

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1. Introduction

Scaffolding has become one of the major concepts associated with the work of Lev Vygotsky, with modern educators and researchers interested in continuing its development and application. As related to the fields of moral development and character education, scaffolding is early in its development and therefore particularly amenable to clarification as well as substantial application.

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Langford (2005) claimed that Vygotsky “coined the term scaffolding” (p. 141). This statement, although figuratively defensible, is not literally accurate. The concept of scaffolding was related to, but not directly taken from, the writings of Vygotsky. Vygotsky, however, did not use the metaphor of scaffolding.

Kaye (1970) planted the seeds for the concept of scaffolding by claiming that a child’s problem solving is often assisted and supported by others who are more skillful. Wood and Middleton (1975) strengthened this argument: “... it is our contention that any process of rule induction or problem-solving on [the child’s] part can, and indeed often must, be facilitated by the intervention of another who is more expert in the situation than [the child] is” (p. 181). Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) were the first to use the term scaffolding in elaboration of the role of tutoring on problem-solving behavior. They argued that the social context of tutoring goes far beyond modeling and imitation and “…involves a kind of “scaffolding” process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90).

While scaffolding and Vygotsky are now virtually synonymous, most authorities in the field are unsure of who first made the connection between them. The implicit connection would favor Bruner who was actively involved in the original scaffolding research and also a leading American Vygotskian scholar having written the introduction to the first English translation of Vygotsky’s (1962) Thought and Language. Stone (1998) argues that Cazden (1979) first made the explicit connection between scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in an unpublished technical report.

This early formulation of the scaffolding concept, with it’s linkage to Vygotskian socio-cultural theory in general and the Vygotskian concept of the ZPD in particular, was anchored by three defining characteristics: (1) that scaffolding was a social process, inseparable from interpersonal actions; (2) that scaffolding was mediated by social tools and symbols, with language being primary; and (3) that scaffolding, as an external support, would eventually be withdrawn from the learning process as the involved mental tools became appropriated and then internalized by the learner. Bruner and Haste (1987) argued “it is difficult, if not impossible, for a child to develop a concept that does not have an expression within her culture of origin, either specifically in language or within other means by which communication is enacted” (p. 9). Without the presence of social interaction and the use of mediational tools, language in particular, the concept of scaffolding would be detached from its defining characteristics and would be unintelligible from Bruner’s perspective because it would lose all linkage to learning advances in the ZPD and the Vygotskian paradigm.

1.1. Deconstructing scaffolding

During the last 20 years, the concept of scaffolding has remained connected, sometimes tenuously, to its Vygotskian origin. While educational texts routinely include discussions of scaffolding within sections elaborating Vygotskian thought, use of the concept has, on occasion, undergone an expansion that tends to distance it from this original formulation. Today, scaffolding is often expanded to the extent that it is viewed as anything that supports learning.

The concept’s theoretical origins have been diluted to the extent that even the idea of self-scaffolding is often raised. Bickhard (1992) has been a strong proponent of the value of self-scaffolding. One of Bickhard’s assumptions is that “scaffolding reduces the
complexities of problems and breaks them down into manageable chunks that the child has a real chance of solving” (p. 35). He then further expands upon that concept by stating, “simplifying cognitive problems… breaking down problems into subproblems, moving to ideal cases, using analogies” (p. 43) are all forms of scaffolding.

Greenfield (1984) warned against confusing strategies that reduce the complexity of the learning task with that of scaffolding. Although the concepts may be similar, Greenfield argued that scaffolding maintains the learning task and its difficulty, but simplifies the learner’s task through the assistance of a more knowledgeable other.

A major risk involved in the acceptance of the notion of self-scaffolding is that by accepting the idea that learning may be assisted by the self as well as by others, it is an easy step to conclude that all learning is accomplished through the process of scaffolding.

Bickhard (1992) acknowledges and accepts this risk when he states that within his model “scaffolding permeates all of development” (p. 33). If all learning is facilitated through scaffolding, the concept then loses all distinctiveness as well as practical usefulness in its ability to distinguish alternative forms of learning. Bruner (personal communication, September 10, 2005) states, “The idea of self-scaffolding seems, at first, a bit bizarre. It’s plain that scaffolding is not an easy or simple concept. As one says in the law, one should use it ‘with due care and caution.’”

In fairness, it should be noted that Bickhard (1992) himself realizes the distance he has moved from the original concept of scaffolding. Bickhard admits that his concept of functional scaffolding lies outside the Bruner/Vygotsky concept of scaffolding. Bickhard rejects the Vygotskian concept of internalization on constructivist grounds and wishes to minimize the centrality of language, all indications of a substantial revamping of the concept.

Dilutions of the conceptual framework of scaffolding are well recognized. Puntambekar and Hubscher (2005) have stated that, “by broadening its scope, the scaffolding construct has been over generalized and has therefore been stripped of its original meaning” (p. 2). Palincsar (1998) argues, “it is the atheoretical use of scaffolding that has become problematic” (p. 370). Palincsar calls for a reembedding of scaffolding within a social-constructivist paradigm that maintains teaching and learning as processes of negotiating meaning between the social and the individual. It is the broadening use of the scaffolding concept that results in Palincsar pronouncing the ZPD and scaffolding as “the most used and least understood constructs to appear in contemporary educational literature” (p. 370).

The increasing volume of the call for the concept of scaffolding to return to its theoretical origins, to reembed itself within its socio-cultural origins, is legitimate and needed. The concept has far too lengthy a history of tremendously productive research and implementation for it to be discarded at this point in time. In order to preserve theoretical integrity and to facilitate precise conceptual communication, all references to the concept of scaffolding in this paper will fall within the strictures of the Wood et al. (1976) definition and the Vygotskian paradigm. It is also the opinion of the authors, that the traditional socio-culturally defined concept of scaffolding best serves the purposes of explaining some of the findings within moral development research, partially understanding currently effective practices within character education, and offering a base and direction for future research and practice.

1.2. Scaffolding within moral development

Vygotskian theory has only recently been applied to the field of moral development. Moral development has its roots in cognitive-developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1965), and has relied almost exclusively on that framework for understanding the development of moral thinking and designing related educational models (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983).

As Tappan (1998) has noted, there are currently numerous approaches to understanding the development of psychological morality; e.g., the “cognitive-developmental” approach which focuses on moral thinking, and the “character education” approach which focuses more broadly on a diverse set of psychological outcomes (reasoning, personality, emotions, etc.) (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004). Tappan was the original voice suggesting and promoting the use of Vygotskian theory as a model for addressing the problems and limitations of the dominant approaches.

…it is time for a change; time, that is, to explore a new approach to moral education: one that retains both the developmental focus of the cognitive-developmental approach and the educational focus of the character education approach, but which ensures that its developmental and educational assumptions are both coherent and compatible; one that also offers a sensitivity to context and culture, and an appreciation of the centrality of social interaction in moral development features that are largely lacking in existing approaches (p. 143).

Tappan centered his arguments on the construct of the ZPD and the critical importance of language (dialogue in particular) and the social nature of moral learning. The focus of this paper is substantially more specific than that of Tappan. Where Tappan dealt with Vygotskian theory in general, and the ZPD in particular, this paper elaborates on a singular specific process (scaffolding) that occurs within the ZPD and its relationship to moral and character development.

Since Vygotsky is widely known for his contributions to cognitive development, it is useful to establish a justification for applying this model to moral development and character education. Vygotsky (1997/1926) himself justified this application: “...moral behavior is a form of behavior which is amenable to education through the social environment in exactly the same way as is everything else” (p. 221). This statement takes the firm stand that moral behavior is not a distinct class of behavior, but behavior learned in the same manner as an individual would learn to tie their shoes or mastering the multiplication tables. Adding further depth to this concept is Vygotsky’s statement that “…moral imperfection always derives from experience and always denotes not a defect in innate reactions and instincts, …but a defect in education” (p. 230). Thus moral behavior is seen as a sub-set of all learned behavior, with Vygotsky believing that his theoretical base of cognitive development applied equally to, and contained, moral development. From the cognitive-developmental framework of Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1976), moral behavior is seen as a result, in part, of an individual’s stage of moral cognitive development. Such development occurs, in large part, as a result of verbally mediated social interactions around moral issues (Berkowitz, 1985). These interactions have been shown to have some of the properties of the ZPD and scaffolding (Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983): e.g., development as a result of exposure to more advanced forms of cognition in one’s co-discussants.
Vygotskian theory is particularly relevant to the different approaches to moral development. According to Schuler and Wolfberg (2004), “Notions of cultural learning are most pertinent to those types of tasks that require the ability to compare one’s own perspective to those of others... Such notions ought to guide a search for instructional alternatives because they provide an account of how one learns through and with another rather than merely from another” (p. 258). Though Schuler and Wolfberg were writing about scaffolding relating to the play of children with autism, few would argue with the centrality of perspective-taking to theories and practices within moral development. Within the field of moral development, Walker (1980) recognized both the centrality and limitations of perspective-taking when he argued, and empirically demonstrated, that cognitive development in general and perspective-taking development in particular were “necessary but not sufficient conditions for moral development” (p. 137). This type of reference to the prescriptive nature of moral development, that knowing what “is” needs to be combined with knowing what “should be”, becomes a theme surfacing in both Kohlbergian (1971) and character education movements.

The cognitive-developmental and character education movements differ in several areas and each movement has given rise to specific applied approaches. Though neither field has embraced Vygotskian theory, both fields contain major ideas and constructs that directly relate to scaffolding and could be elaborated and clarified through usage of the concept.

1.3. Scaffolding within the cognitive-developmental approach to moral education

The use of the moral discussion process, as introduced by Blatt (1969) and Blatt & Kohlberg (1975) and integrated into the more comprehensive Just Community model (Power et al., 1989), has become a standard approach to impacting moral reasoning in educational settings. Through the work of Blatt and Kohlberg two significant concepts pertaining to this discussion were developed: the **Blatt effect** that social discussions revolving around moral dilemmas do impact moral reasoning (on the average producing gains of approximately one third stage per student), and the **plus-one convention** stating that the moral reasoning of children is enhanced through teacher arguments aimed one stage above the reasoning level of the children.

Berkowitz, Gibbs, and Broughton (1980) argued that usage of the teacher generated plus-one arguments is largely a myth (because teachers rarely actually do it) and reported a significant impact of exposure to peer differences significantly less than one full stage. Exposure to peer reasoning at one’s own current stage will have little impact on improved student moral reasoning yet a one full stage difference may be too large to promote optimal reasoning changes. Berkowitz (1981) in stressing the importance of the heterogeneity of the students’ stages of moral reasoning argued, “… moral education seems to depend on the reasoning of the students more than on the reasoning of the teachers” (p. 488). Such findings invoke thoughts of Piaget’s (1964) concept of disequilibrium caused by exposure to information not readily adaptable to the student’s existing schemata. For Vygotsky it would be critical that the information presented was within the learner’s ZPD (potential development) rather than at their current developmental stage (actual development).

Though the connections between plus-one findings and Vygotskian theory have not gone unnoticed, little has been done to expand upon the connection or to pursue it through additional research. The Berkowitz et al. (1980) findings regarding the limitations of the
plus-one convention appear on the surface to be a delineation of the modal ZPD for their participants involved in moral discussions. If reasoning level is relatively equal between teacher and child, nothing is learned. If the difference in reasoning level is large enough to exceed the ZPD of the child, little will be learned and, according to Berkowitz (1981), the participants will appear to “talk past each other” (p. 488).

Berkowitz’s (1981) stress on student-to-student interaction being potentially far more significant than teacher-to-student interaction, as well as the critical importance of student heterogeneity in moral reasoning is also consistent with a ZPD/scaffolding explanation. Where Berkowitz found student-to-student interaction potentially superior, Taylor, King, and Pinsent (2003), in studying the use of scaffolding techniques with adult literacy education, found that students also had a strong preference for using another student as a scaffold rather than the teacher when given a choice. There are surely multiple factors involved, but it may well be that student-to-student scaffolding is both effective and preferred because of a reduced possibility of the scaffold (another student) interacting in a way that exceeds the ZPD of the lower level student. The growth of cooperative learning over the past few decades is further testament to the power of peer scaffolding (Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

1.4. Scaffolding within the character education approach

According to Berkowitz and Bier (2005a), character is the complex composite of psychological characteristics that enable and motivate an individual to function as an effective moral agent, a composite that includes cognitive-developmental moral reasoning, although most working in the field of character education focus more on other aspects of character (e.g., personality, behavior, and affect) than on moral reasoning. Modern character education is a movement centered primarily on intentional and comprehensive school-based initiatives that are designed to promote the development of character in students. Common practices within character education typically come from a wide variety of educational methods and models. One long-standing and well-accepted practice is that of class meetings. Such meetings are designed to promote student empowerment, student sense of belonging, and a caring classroom atmosphere. Class meetings are at the heart of many successful character education programs, such as the Child Development Project (Dalton & Watson, 1997), and the Responsive Classroom (Kriete, 2002), and Open Circle (Siegle, Lange, & Macklem, 1997).

Though class meetings can have various formats, which reflect both the personality and the goals of the teacher or educational organization as well as the formal program being implemented, one of the more common purposes of class meetings is problem solving. Students meet to discuss various problems within their class community and to potentially arrive at solutions acceptable to the class as a whole.

In early class meetings, the teacher maintains a fair amount of control over the process in order to model the process, maintain direction, encourage participation, and monitor progress toward problem solution. With continued practice and experience, teachers often strive to gradually shift control of the meetings to the students. Eventually, it is not unusual for class meetings to be almost totally student directed, with the teacher primarily observing and responding when directly asked a question.

Initially, class meetings for the purpose of solving problems within the classroom are tools beyond the scope and ability of many students. The rationale for class meetings may
be stated in terms such as student empowerment, or in giving students voice, or as an aid in raising sense of community, or even an apprenticeship in democracy. Whatever rationale is voiced, it is also obviously clear that a context has been established which is potentially powerful for the scaffolding of various abilities and thought processes, at the same time it may serve the disequilibrating process in cognitive-structural development (Berkowitz, 1985). Class meetings, as an activity, meet all three critical criteria for scaffolding. The activity is highly social, encouraging interpersonal communication between all members of the class. The activity is dependent upon language to communicate meaning, and, ideally, an external support, namely the teacher, is gradually removed from control of the activity until students are relatively self-sufficient in performing the activity. That learning has occurred, and that skills have been internalized, is supported by observations that, following mastery of class meeting skills, classroom problems tend to reduce and students are far better equipped to deal with problems on their own, both in and out of the classroom.

Berkowitz and Bier (2005a) have performed the most rigorous and inclusive study to date regarding what practices are effective within character education. Based upon this review, Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier, and Battistich (2006) reported that the most commonly shared practices of effective character education programs included “professional development for those implementing the initiative; student-centered peer discussions; interactive strategies such as class meetings; student governance, and peer tutoring that contribute to perspective-taking experiences; problem-solving and decision-making training; direct training of social, emotional, and personal management skills…; cooperative learning; self-management skills training and awareness; parent training and involvement; shared reading/story telling; and games/puppets” (p. 696).

It is not surprising that all the practices, as determined by Berkowitz and Bier (2005a), are placed within a structure, and occur within environments ideally suited for potentially effective scaffolding. It is just such environments, with their emphasis on shared meanings, shared goals, and shared directions operating within social settings highly dependent upon language that scaffolding can have its greatest impact.

That the concept of scaffolding has explanatory abilities within Kohlbergian methodology (e.g. the plus-one convention) and that it quite possibly is an active ingredient in successful character education programs is much more than a minimalist attempt to find connections. Furthermore, from a more traditional character education perspective (Beland, 2003), scaffolding serves the development of both the cognitive and behavioral aspects of character. The Character Education Partnership (www.character.org) defines character as encompassing cognition (knowing the good), affect (desiring the good), and behavior (doing the good). The cognitive aspect includes both the cognitive-developmental reasoning structures and the acquisition of knowledge, both of which can readily be achieved through scaffolding. The behavioral refers to the social-emotional skills necessary for self-management and social functioning (Elias et al., 1997). Again, such skills (anger management, peer conflict resolution, respectful disagreement, etc.) can be readily acquired through scaffolding. Many of these skills are actually necessary for effective class meetings and moral discussions.

There are many clear applications of scaffolding to moral development and character education. Applications to moral dilemma discussions and class meetings have already been proposed above. Interventions grounded in the acquisition of a developmentally complex and challenging concept could also benefit from the scaffolding perspective.
For example, the complex honor systems at many high schools and institutions of higher education are presented as a pill to be swallowed all at once. Rather, a gradual scaffolding of the concept of honor, its constituent parts, and, most dauntingly for adolescents, the sub-concept of honor as including non-tolerance of others’ transgressions might be more effective in promoting the complete development of honor and compliance with the related honor code (Berkowitz, 1999). Yet another example is the recent concept of “developmental discipline” (Watson, 2003), which suggests helping students slowly grasp and adhere to a classroom (or school) concept of appropriate behavior. Simply ordering students to comply when they do not yet have the cognitive and/or behavioral grasp of the prescribed behavior is not as effective as scaffolding their attempts to understand and comply. Additionally, student-centered conflict resolution models are increasingly popular in schools (e.g., Porro, 1996). Here too, scaffolding allows students to gradually learn from their more developed peers (and teachers) how to promote peaceful resolutions of peer conflicts.

1.5. Scaffolding the future

If there is an obvious observation following a review of scaffolding as applied to moral development and character education it is that there are far more questions than there are answers. In terms of research and understanding, there is far more work needing to be done and there is much to be gained and applied. Moral development would be pushed to look at itself from a different perspective. Character education would be pushed to more deliberately work within and from a theoretical foundation. Neither push would be harmful, and the potential gains could be immense.

To realize such potential gains, it is imperative, as stated by Palincsar (1998), to “reposition the metaphor in its theoretical frame” (p. 370). Karpov (2005) criticizes Western researchers and educators for taking Vygotskian concepts and then removing them from their larger conceptual frame. There is no question that Bruner understood the larger conceptual frame of Vygotsky, and it was from placement within this larger frame that scaffolding drew much of its power and its impact. There is a need to put stricture on the concept of scaffolding, to maintain the focus, power, and potential of the original concept. Within Vygotskian thought, shared meaning is a powerful concept, and preserving the common and easily shared meaning of scaffolding is critical for maintaining the importance and understanding of the concept. As Palincsar succinctly states, “scaffolding is a very accessible metaphor, and accessibility is not something to be treated lightly, especially by those of us who conduct research for the purpose of making a difference in educational practice” (p. 372).

If the theoretical framing of scaffolding needs to be tightened, it is also true that its research objectives and directions need to be substantially broadened. Palincsar (1998) has also called for educational research to consider how contexts and activities scaffold learning. Because of its emphasis on practice, character education may well be in an advanced position to refine answers within this area. That scaffolding requires social processing is a given, but people interact within contexts and those contexts make differences. For character education, Berkowitz et al. (2006) have identified those contexts and activities that are most likely to have an impact on children; contexts and activities potentially rich in scaffolding. What is now needed is a more detailed examination of how
those contexts and activities are working, why some work better than others, and what the parameters are that most influence the outcomes.

Of particular interest within character education would be a determination of how the various aspects of morality, such as the cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects, interact and can be facilitated by scaffolding. As noted above, scaffolding can readily be applied to the cognitive and behavioral aspects of character. What is far less clear is how to scaffold affective development.

Where scaffolding is understood as developmentally progressive, character has a prescriptive component. It is potentially possible to scaffold a competency that is negative from a character viewpoint: to assist a child to lie or to cheat with increased efficiency. Vygotsky (1997/1926) seemed aware of this potential difficulty in moral education when he stated, “every description of misdeeds, by creating a succession of images in the child’s mind, creates, at the same time, the impulse and inclination to perform these deeds. Recall that every act of consciousness is a nascent activity, and that, consequently, by cautioning pupils against what they should not do, we are, at the same time, focusing their attention on these deeds, and thereby encouraging them to perform them” (p. 228).

Most encouraging for the future, is the fact that the character education movement is currently heavily involved in practices easily framed within a socio-cultural/Vygotskian base. Within the movement, many of the best practices are strongly social and language dependent, key ingredients for effective scaffolding.

Berk and Winsler (1995) offered considerable guidance on how to effectively scaffold children’s learning. Emphasis was given to the primary Vygotskian principles of social setting and language rich environments. At the end of their book, Berk and Winsler present the following four challenges to education based upon a Vygotskian model:

1. “invest more in early childhood education”;
2. “arrange conditions that foster real community and parent involvement”;
3. “[combat the] isolation of teachers in self-contained classrooms in favor of teams of educators who work together”;
4. “relinquish rigid organizational structures and pre-scribed curricula... in favor of flexible interactive approaches” (p. 153).

Regarding the second challenge of Berk and Winsler (1995), character education is foundationally about creating caring school communities (see www.devstu.org). Character education depends upon democratically empowering all stakeholder groups and emphasizes the importance of parental involvement (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005b).

Challenge number three overlaps with number two in encouraging the involvement of teacher in the school community both as stakeholders and as role models. Effective character education requires “ethical professional learning communities” of educators (Lickona & Davidson, 2005).

And finally, challenge number four is a guiding principle within the character education movement. One of the most common pedagogical elements of effective character education programs is the use of peer interactive strategies such as cooperative learning, class meetings, and moral dilemma discussions (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a). Similarly, truly empowering students, often through democratization of classrooms and schools, is a common character education practice.
That so many character education practices can be viewed as socio-cultural in theory and highly scaffolding oriented in implementation is a strong indication of conceptual value. That character education has not yet embraced particular theories (e.g. socio-cultural theory) is merely an indication of possible future direction and vast potential growth.

References


