

Apply the **Optimal Learning Model**

Learner independence is achieved through sufficient and effective demonstrations, many shared experiences, and ample guided and independent practice. See the Optimal Learning Model chart on the inside front cover. Becoming independent also depends on learning from a knowledgeable, trustworthy source and having the task or text presented as a meaningful whole before breaking it down into its parts. For the task or text to be meaningful, the learner first has to have enough background knowledge and vocabulary to understand it. All of this is as true for middle and high school learners as it is for elementary students.

Here's a personal story. In creating the *Transforming Our Teaching* projects (Routman 2008) showing educators what the whole of effective teaching looks like and sounds like, I needed to learn how to transfer video clips from a video camera to my Macintosh computer. Being a self-acknowledged technophobe with limited skills in this venue, I sought help from Rhett, one of Apple's local "MacGeniuses." Having no background to understand what my patient tutor was showing me, I took detailed notes listing the step-by-step procedures, beginning with, "Turn on the camera." Once Rhett left, I looked at my notes, turned on the video camera, and froze. I had no idea what to do next and no background to understand what I had written down. I was so focused on getting each step recorded in sequence that I never understood how these steps or parts connected to the whole process.

"I believe the end goal of education must be to teach our students to be independent problem solvers who direct their own learning and set new, worthwhile goals."

When I met with Rhett the following week, we began again. I explained to him that I could not even begin to apply what he had shown me the previous week. He replied, "It's like you're standing on the roof of a building with a shaky foundation." It was an apt description. Without the basics, the best I could do was rotely follow procedures.

For this meeting, I set aside step-by-step thinking and began to look at the whole. I took no notes. Instead, I tried hard to watch carefully what Rhett was doing, listen to his explanations, and attempt to understand the technical operations and the reasons for doing them. I still didn't know enough to ask intelligent questions. But in this meeting, I not only observed what he was doing but also requested he not leave until we had gone through the procedures together. I would need this "We do it" experience several more times before I had enough confidence and know-how to try out the process with Rhett's guidance—that is, with him by my side but with me now taking the lead. Eventually I could transfer a video clip from my camera to my computer, but just barely. I never got beyond the procedural level of following steps. More important, I never truly "learned" the activity, because I am unable to do it today. Like many of our students, I was "exposed" to the activity; the material was "covered." I had a competent and patient teacher, but too few shared demonstrations—along with

THE OPTIMAL LEARNING MODEL

Teaching and Learning Contexts	Who Holds Book/Pen	Degree of Explicitness/Support
Celebration & Assessment Are Embedded		
Reading and Writing Aloud	Teacher/Student	Demonstration
Shared Reading and Writing Scaffolded Conversations	Teacher/Student	Shared Demonstration
<i>gradual handover of responsibility</i>		
Guided Reading Literature Conversations Reading/Writing Conferences	Student/Teacher	Guided Practice
Independent Reading/Writing	Student/Teacher	Independent Practice
Celebration & Assessment Are Embedded		

insufficient practice, background knowledge, and understanding—left me unable to apply what I was being taught.

My discomfort and lack of confidence in this new learning situation brought home once again the point that for learning to be successful, the learner must:

- Need and want to learn something (or, at a minimum, see the purpose for the lesson).
- Have sufficient background knowledge, vocabulary, and skills to understand the task or text and ask intelligent questions (or receive the necessary background before attempting the task or text).
- Admire and trust the teacher or expert.
- Be shown how to do it (through demonstration, explanation, reading about it, viewing it).
- Have repeated opportunities to try out the task or process, with much support and hand-holding (shared experiences).
- Be given ample time for guided and independent practice with helpful feedback.
- Learn enough strategies to begin to problem solve independently.
- Eventually be able to apply the learning to new contexts.

A significant classroom-based insight is that the learner can't ask questions without a basic knowledge of the subject. This is why so many of our struggling learners are silent. They don't know enough about the subject at hand to know what their questions are, and they remain on shaky ground. I was unable ask Rhett intelligent questions because I lacked even a rudimentary understanding of what we were undertaking.

Also, most importantly, students need to spend most of their time “doing.” Without opportunities and sustained time to practice, the best lesson can go nowhere. It is while practicing that you learn what you don't know and what your questions are. To teach successfully, we need to follow the Optimal Learning Model, following our demonstrations with lots of time and opportunity for guided talk, collaboration, practice, and coaching.

Do Lots of Frontloading

The better job we do preparing students to do a task (frontloading), the more independently students—even our youngest ones—are able to work and problem solve and produce better-quality work. We cannot expect them to succeed without adequate frontloading.

Working with a class of twenty-three kindergartners (see the related discussion on pp. 25–27), many of whom were English language learners, all are able to work independently writing stories about their lives. Even though the task is new to them, the frontloading we did together makes their accomplishments possible. They hear lots of stories read aloud, see and examine published books written by other kindergartners, observe me think aloud and write my own story about my cat Norman, hear and participate in public scaffolded conversations before writing, and have a quick (roving) conference with me as they are writing.

The following factors, all part of the Optimal Learning Model, also make their success possible:

- The task is engaging and makes sense.
- Expectations are clear.
- Demonstrations are plentiful and relevant (shared writing, teacher thinking aloud and writing, public scaffolded conversations, exemplary work from former students).
- Opportunities to practice—try out and apply what has been demonstrated and scaffolded—are frequent and sustained.
- Supportive resources (peers, word walls, dictionaries, charts, classroom library) are available, accessible, and easy to use.
- Helpful feedback is ongoing.
- The outcome is known (celebrating, publishing, teaching, evaluating).

Capitalize on Shared Experiences

When we follow the Optimal Learning Model by building on students' strengths and releasing responsibility to students when they are ready to apply what we've been teaching, students have immediate success. Think of the OLM as, *I do it, We do it, We do it, We do it, You do it.*

Shared experiences (*We do it*) often make the critical difference between a student's (or a teacher's) ultimate success or frustration. Teachers often say they don't have time for shared experiences because of curriculum demands, limited time, and testing pressures. Typically, teachers move from "I do it" to "Now you do it" with resulting frustration and failure for many students. Many teachers in the intermediate grades as well as in middle school and high school believe that such "hand-holding" will slow things down. Just the opposite. Sometimes you have to "slow down to hurry up." For many middle school readers, who continue to struggle after years of failure, the OLM and its focus on shared and scaffolded experiences is the framework for successful intervention in all content areas.

Shared literacy experiences—in which the in-charge expert holds the pen or book while soliciting and shaping responses from students—provide the scaffolding and hand-holding learners need before they can become independent. "We do it" can take several forms:

- Teacher with student(s).
- Teacher with teacher.
- Students with students (small groups).
- Partner work.



This is a demonstration for the teacher and students before expecting them to attempt a task, with support.

The latter two groupings require that demonstration and practice have already taken place. Most often, I demonstrate with the whole class gathered together and looking on. For example, before I release students to partner-read or read together in a small group:

- I demonstrate (perhaps more than once) what that looks like and sounds like as I direct a student or group of students.
- I lead another demonstration in which students actively participate.
- Students try out the process with me at their side to coach them and give helpful feedback.
- I repeat as needed until several students or groups of students have demonstrated they are capable of undertaking the task with limited assistance.

Here's another example. In a fourth-grade classroom in which students were learning how to write research reports, small student groups wrote their final reports collaboratively. First, the teacher, Darcy Ballentine, demonstrated how to take notes and turn them into a cohesive paragraph. Next, using the same notes, she had students write another paragraph with her. Then small groups of three or four students (mixed abilities and genders) turned the rest of the notes into a report, with Darcy available to guide them through the process.

Our thinking was that the students would be most successful writing their final reports if they worked collaboratively: they were not yet ready to write individual reports that would match this quality. The process worked out well. The final published reports of each group were excellent, and eight of the twenty-one students in the class were rated advanced on the extended writing portion of the state's rigorous writing test (all but two of the remaining students received a proficient rating).

Embrace Scaffolded Conversations

By scaffolded conversations I mean focused talk that prompts students to think about and express ideas they might not generate on their own. In a scaffolded conversation, I am face-to-face with the child in a natural, give-and-take exchange. I concentrate on what the child is trying to say and focus my talk and questions there. Scaffolded conversations take place as part of celebrations, conferences, and content-area learning and:

- Build on the student's strengths.
- Extend what the child is attempting to do.
- Suggest language and ideas for the child to consider.
- Celebrate memorable language the child has employed.



Here I am having additional scaffolded conversations with a few students who are not quite ready to work independently.

While scaffolded conversations take place throughout the day and across the curriculum, most often I have these conversations publicly during writing time and tell the class something like this: *I am going to have a conversation with Michael. Even though it's about his writing, it's important for you to carefully listen, because you'll get ideas for your own writing.* Then I check for understanding: *OK, turn-and-talk to your partner. Tell each other the reason we're having these conversations.* If we want students to engage and apply what they learn from our demonstrations, we have to be sure they understand and value the purpose for them.

I used to quickly go around the classroom before students were about to write and ask each student to name their topic. Not sur-

prisingly, much of the resulting writing was superficial, in keeping with my simple question. When I embraced “less is more” and had public, in-depth conversations with just one or two students about their topic and how they might develop it, the results were dramatic. Great detail, elaboration, and voice began to appear in students' writing (without my labeling those traits).

To capture students' ideas and unique language so that they (and I) can remember them, I jot them down on a sticky note, which the children then attach to their paper. Some teachers provide a small notebook (a commercial one or just pages stapled together) so all comments are collected in one place for each student. Writing down key words from the conversation:

- Lets the child (and other students) know that what has been expressed is noteworthy.
- Jogs the child's memory when he or she begins to write.
- Encourages other students to attempt similar ideas, organization, and language.
- Reminds the teacher what was discussed, which can be helpful when celebrating and conferring.
- Provides a record of the child's thinking.



Here are two children telling their stories before writing them out. They are also getting ideas from their peers.

I never omit scaffolded conversations, especially for our English language learners and struggling students. Saying the story or factual information—with our support—before they write it promotes higher-quality language, better organization of thinking and content, and greater possibilities for what the child can accomplish. See the OLM on the inside front cover and notice the area of scaffolded conversations.