Scaffolding Overview

"Scaffolding" is a teaching strategy that engages young people collaboratively in tasks that they would not be able to complete on their own. Initially, the instructor provides extensive support, or scaffolding, gradually fading out the support as the youth learns the new content or behavior. The support is given temporarily, until the youth masters the content and/or process and can control the task independently.

Successful scaffolding builds on the student's existing skills in order to expand his/her skill set. An initial assessment of the youth is critical. In addition the instructor needs to continuously assess the youth's learning and skill development to match the level of support with the youth's learning. Successful scaffolding also requires that the goal is set within the reach of the student's ability, thus guaranteeing success.

Scaffolding involves four main components:

Break down skills into small units
Many independent living and social interaction skills are really complex skill sets requiring behavioral, decision making, and cognitive skills. Breaking these skills into smaller units makes teaching and acquiring skills more manageable. It makes the task less overwhelming.

Assess the youth's learning zone
By identifying where the youth is in regard to his/her skill development, the worker can gauge how high to set the goal, what level of support and guidance is needed, and how to keep the youth motivated to learn.

An accurate assessment relies on behavior observations but also on conversations with the youth to identify his/her skill level, experiences, interests, and strengths related to the task.

Provide guidance and support
Scaffolding distinguishes several different strategies for providing guidance and support. These strategies can be integrated or used individually depending on the task or the material to be taught. Modeling is usually used first. Offering explanations is another important strategy in the beginning, so that the learner knows what they are learning and why.

1) **Modeling:** Demonstrating how one should feel, think, or act in a given situation by:
   - **Thinking aloud:** Verbalizing every step of the task sequence
   - **Talking aloud:** Demonstrating the task physically plus verbalizing the thought process or problem-solving strategy
   - **Performance modeling**: Simply demonstrating the task

2) **Offering explanations:** Describing what is being learned, why it is being learned, and how to apply it.
   - **Prompts or key words:** As the youth gains more experience, explanations can be shortened to reminders or key words.
   - **Memory aids** (examples: a rhyme, jingle, or visual)

3) **Inviting youth to contribute to the process:** Asking young people to add their ideas or suggestions. This will engage them and provide them with ownership of the learning experience.
   - Example: *Introduce a new step, then invite student to suggest the next step.*

4) **Verifying and clarifying the young person's understanding**: Offering affirmative feedback or corrective feedback.

Ensure a Successful Outcome

Making the learning experience a successful one is essential to keep young people motivated in learning. Success is linked to feasible, reachable goals. Knowing the youth's learning zone and engaging the youth in setting the goal are helpful strategies.

It might be difficult at times to set the learning goals just right. Generally, it is better to set goals lower than to set them too high. Practicing skills they already possess can be engaging, whereas young people tend to withdraw and give up if the goal is set too high, creating an experience of failure.

Making learning a successful experience also depends on the young person's motivation. It will be helpful to assess and discuss how important the learning objective (skill set) is to the youth, as well as the youth's feelings about being able to achieve the objective and any links to an emotional response (positive or negative) due to past experience.