Releasing

We must transfer responsibility for learning to our students gradually—and offer support at every step.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

There is no shortage of teachers assigning students responsibility for their own learning. Who isn't familiar with the following scenarios?

- In a 1st grade class, students independently complete practice pages from a workbook.
- A teacher gives her 4th graders a writing prompt and allows them 30 minutes to respond.
- Students in 8th grade are told to read Chapter 12 and answer the questions at the end.

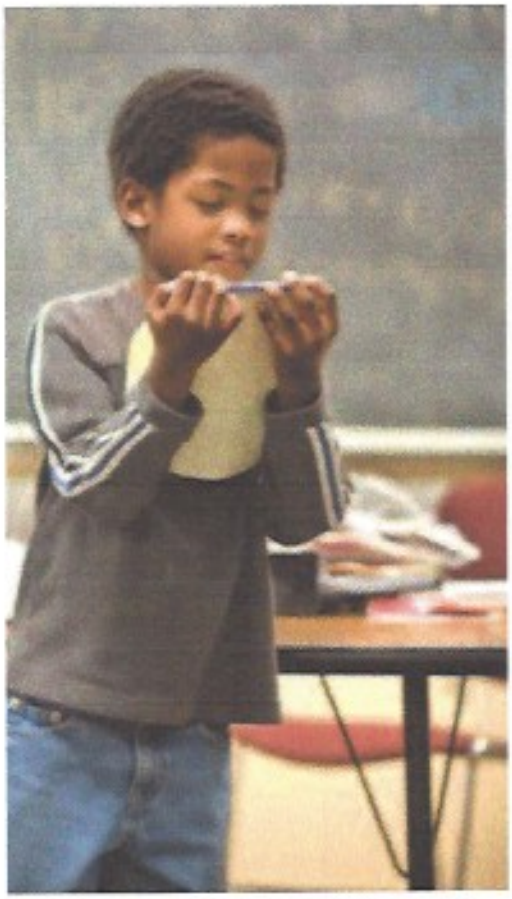
Yes, students in these situations are responsible for their own work, but are they really learning? Students who do

Responsibility

well in these kinds of activities are usually those who already understand the content. It's not hard to fill out a worksheet (or "shut-up sheet" as one of our colleagues calls it) when you have already mastered the information. Nor is it hard to answer end-of-chapter questions when you read well and are familiar with the genre of questions asked in textbooks.

But these "busywork" examples are not exemplars of true independent learning, which is a major goal of education. If students are to reach the high expectations we set for them, they need to be able to marshal previously learned concepts and apply them to achieve new understandings after they leave our schools.

How can we set students on a path to true independent learning? One way is to purposefully yet gradually release responsibility for learning from teacher to student (Fisher & Frey, 2008). To make this transfer of responsibility, we must give students supports that they can hold on to as they take the lead—not just push them onto the path and hope they find their way. These supports include models of the kind of thinking they will need to do, access to academic language, peer collaboration, and guided instruction. We've found the



following instructional routines work well for teachers who seek to promote lasting ownership of learning.

Establishing Learning Objectives

Teachers must clearly establish the purpose behind any activity, including what exactly students are supposed to do to successfully perform learning tasks. A coherent objective or purpose makes it easier for learners to gain access to background knowledge that they can use to build a schema for new learning. When the objective is clear and instructional tasks align with it, students can share responsibility for learning and will be motivated to do so. When the purpose for learning is muddy or students don't buy into it or perceive its relevance, they may complete many tasks but will have zero motivation and assume no responsibility. Students practically beg for an established purpose to their learning when they ask, "What do we gotta know?" and "What are we supposed to do with the information?"

The learning purposes that you provide students when they ask these guidance-seeking questions should include both content and language goals, especially for English language learners (Dong, 2004/2005; Hill & Flynn, 2006). Generally, teachers post on the wall and discuss with students exactly what is to be learned and how students should demonstrate that learning through oral or written language. Content goals should come directly from the standards. For example, in a unit focused on oceans, waves, and tides, a content goal for a given lesson might be to identify the phases of the moon.

The focus of the language goal should reflect students' needs. For example, a goal might focus on vocabulary. Students of all ages need to understand both specialized words (those that change meaning in different contexts, such as *expression*) and technical words (words rarely used outside of a specific discipline, such as *rhombus*). A vocabulary-related language goal for the study of the moon might be to use the terms *full*, *half*, *quarter*, and *new moon* to explain the phases of the moon.

Alternatively, the goal might focus on language structure, such as grammar, syntax, or sentence frames. Returning to the study of the moon, a structure-related goal might be to appropriately use sequence words (*first, next, then, last*) to explain the phases of the moon. Or the goal might be based on mastering certain functions of language, such as questioning, summarizing, explaining, or persuading. A function-related language goal might be to explain how the moon, earth, and sun move through their phases.

Teacher Modeling

Modeling is another crucial component of releasing responsibility. Humans are hardwired to imitate other humans (Winerman, 2005). Students deserve to see an example of the kind of thinking and language a new task will require before they engage in that task independently, and teachers can provide that example. Through modeling—either by thinking aloud or by showing students their written notes—teachers reveal what goes on in their minds as they solve problems, read, write, or generate ideas. Modeling does not mean providing explanations or questioning students; it means demonstrating the way experts think as they approach problems.

Expert teachers prepare students for independent reading by focusing their modeling on comprehension, word solving, text structures, and text features (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2008).

Choosing Strategies for Comprehension

Good readers deploy a number of cognitive strategies as they read, such as questioning, inferring, making connections, summarizing, and predicting. The key is to know when to use each strategy and to be able to use it automatically.

For example, predicting can help a reader create meaning when the author provides specific kinds of information, but it isn't a good strategy for understanding all texts. To model using this strategy well, a teacher might share his or her prediction when reading a certain text and then ask students to make predictions. A 9th grade English teacher we observed paused while reading the

short story "Kipling and I" by Jesús Colón out loud and speculated on why the author would describe a gilt-framed poem so early in the story. "This must be an important object to the narrator," she mused. "I'll need to keep reading to find out." Later in the same story, she reflected on the protagonist's decision to burn the poem to keep warm:

> I wonder if this means that the inspirational message of the poem is being destroyed, too? I could understand this in two ways: that he feels the poem is inside of him and he doesn't need the object anymore, or that a dream has died. I'm going to reread that earlier section where the character describes the poem's importance to see if I missed anything that would help me understand the deeper meaning.

With enough modeling and practice, students will imitate behaviors like this and reach for appropriate strategies automatically as they read complex texts on their own.

Teaching Word Solving

Given the demands of academic vocabulary and the effect that word knowledge has on comprehension, teachers need to show students how they can figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words on their own. Students must practice this skill enough so that it becomes automatic. There are two main word-solving strategies:

- Using context clues. We call this an "outside the word" strategy. A teacher might pause on an unfamiliar word and model using an illustration and familiar words in the same sentence to make inferences about the mystery word's meaning. The teacher's modeling should get across the fact that context clues don't always help and may be misleading. For example, a teacher might draw students' attention to a diagram of the solar system as she notes that an elliptical orbit is shaped like an oval: "I wasn't sure at first what *elliptical* meant, but the picture helped me understand that an elliptical shape is not a perfect circle."
- Looking "inside the word." This strategy involves looking at prefixes, suffixes, bases, roots, or cognates of the target word for clues to meaning. For example, while reading a science text out loud, Mr. Bonine stopped at the word *carnivore* and modeled his realization that *carnivore* was related to the Spanish word *carne* (meat). He noted that this probably means *carnivore* has something to do with meat and went on to use context clues—the fact that the word was describing an animal's habits—to conclude that the word meant meat eating.

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Teachers should also model using dictionaries, Internet resources, or even reliable peers to understand a word, for those times when neither context clues nor looking inside the word helps.

Highlighting Text Structures

One way readers extract meaning from texts is through recognizing common text structures. Almost all narrative texts, for example, use a "story grammar" that includes character, setting, plot, conflict, resolution, dialogue, and various literary devices. Teachers should model using these structures as a tool for understanding stories. For example, Mr. Goodwin paused in his reading of *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton to point out how a character's recitation of Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" at a key point in the story helps reveal the themes of loss and redemption that are central to the novel—and that using a recurring phrase or image to highlight an underlying theme is a common text structure.

Nonfiction texts also have internal structures, such as problem-solution, cause-effect, compare-contrast, and description. Noticing which text structure a particular informational text uses helps readers predict what kind of content the author might present next. It also helps people remember what they read and organize their thinking about a text.

For example, while reading a passage about the construction of the transcontinental railroad, Ms. Allen paused at the point where the author introduced the problem of pay differences between Chinese and white workers and told the class

> Now here's a problem. I can predict that the solution to the problem will come next. That's how many authors write, by introducing a problem followed by a solution. I might even help myself remember this information by taking notes using a problem and solution chart. In many cases, the solution to one problem creates new problems. I wonder if that will be the case here.

When Ms. Allen came to the part in the text describing the Chinese workers' strike for higher wages, she pointed out that the author was following up a problem with its solution.

Explaining Text Features

Students often need help understanding the text features included with many academic readings, such as tables, charts, figures, bold and italicized words, and headings. Many students aren't even sure when they should read text features—before, during, or after the text. But a lot of essential information can be presented in these features.

Teachers should model how to thoughtfully analyze text features. For

example, while looking at a table in a math textbook on the use of distance as a function of time, Ms. Burrow pointed out the column and row headings and showed students how to use them to find information. Ms. Johnson modeled how to interpret a legend on a map in the geography textbook to find the latitude and longitude of a city.

Collaborative Work

Armed with a clear learning objective and examples of the kind of thinking and actions they should engage in, students will be ready to work—but not to work independently yet. First, they need time to try out their fledgling understandings in collaborative work with their peers. Collaborative learning transfers more responsibility to students, yet provides them with peer support.

In any content area, students learn more and retain information longer when they work in productive groups (Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991). Students who work in collaborative groups tend to be more satisfied with their classes, complete more assignments, and generally like school better (Summers, 2006). To be productive, groups need sufficient time to interact, time lines, clear roles for everyone in the group, and tasks that truly call for interdependence. Ideal collaborative learning tasks are those that cannot be accomplished just as well by one individual; they require interaction and the natural give and take of learning.

But the real key to collaborative groups lies in accountability. Each student must be held accountable for some aspect of the work. Unfortunately, that's not always the case: We can all remember group work in which one student did all the work and everyone else got the credit. This situation not only prevents some students from learning but also thwarts teachers' attempts to check for each student's understanding and link instruction with formative assessment. In addition to holding students individually accountable, teachers should hold the entire group accountable for completing tasks. Tasks can vary from something as simple as straightening up the science area after a complicated experiment to something as complex as writing a group summary of a lesson.

In her geometry class, Ms. Chen has students complete a collaborative poster for each proof they solve. Each student contributes to the poster using an individually assigned marker color. In addition, the group must ensure that each of its members can explain the proof independently. This requires a significant amount of reteaching, negotiation, support, and trust. Students assume responsibility for their learning and the learning of their peers.

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Guided Instruction

While modeling and collaborative work provide a great start, some learners will require guided instruction to successfully assume responsibility for their own learning. Guided instruction is the strategic use of cues, prompts, or questions to facilitate student thinking. Teachers should base guided instruction on what formative assessments reveal that students need. Such instruction is most effective with small groups.

In working with a group of students who misunderstood photosynthesis, Ms. Grant used a series of questions and prompts to increase understanding.

> MS. GRANT: Some of you thought that plants ate soil to grow. Do you remember the video we saw about photosynthesis? What role did soil play in that video?
>
> DESTINY: Well, it wasn't about the dirt. It was about the sun and carbon dioxide.
>
> ANDREW: And how the plants make oxygen for humans.
>
> MS. GRANT: Plants make oxygen for humans?
>
> ANDREW: Well, I guess that they'd make oxygen even if there were no humans.
>
> MICHAEL: It's called a byproduct. They don't make oxygen for humans. They just make oxygen.
>
> MS. GRANT: And what is left, once they've made this oxygen?
>
> DESTINY: Carbon. They take in carbon dioxide and then give off oxygen, so carbon is left.
>
> MS. GRANT: And what do you know about carbon?

Guided instruction gives teachers an opportunity to engage students' thinking without telling them what to think—and a chance to scaffold students' understanding before they complete tasks independently.

From Competent Novice to Expert

Newly (or barely) learned tasks do not make for good independent learning activities. Unfortunately, educators often ask students to assume full responsibility for their learning prematurely in the instructional cycle. In the MetLife survey about homework (Markow, Kim, & Liebman, 2007), 26 percent of secondary teachers confessed that they "very often or often" assign homework because they run out of time in class to cover material. The likelihood of a student successfully completing newly introduced tasks alone, away from fellow learners or the teacher, is slim.

Teachers should reserve independent work for review and reinforcement of concepts that have been previously taught. This phase of the instructional framework is ideal for the spiral review that most educators know their students need. In addition, it helps build connections between previously learned concepts and new ones. For example, if an independent learning task to review

the (previously taught) phases of the moon coincides with new instruction on the movement of planets around the sun, the task will not only reinforce students' knowledge of the moon's phases but also deepen their understanding of patterns of movement in the sky and how planets influence one another.

Well-structured independent learning tasks are the ultimate way to build self-esteem through competence. By the time a student has reached this phase, he or she should be working at the level of competent novice; the purpose of additional work is to refine skills and become expert. Isn't this how many of us learned to be good teachers? EL

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To learn more about releasing responsibility, read a chapter from Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey's book *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching: A Framework for the Gradual Release of Responsibility* at www.ascd.org/portal/redirect.jsp?ProductID=108010.

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