

# Introduction

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For a few years now, I have suggested in my workshops, classes, and, yes, even in my books that explicit instruction helps students reach the end goal, the *learning*. And clear learning intentions, demonstrations, and modeling do have a strong research base (Fisher, Fry, & Hattie, 2016). But I didn't emphasize enough that *the learning happens when the students are doing the work, not you*.

You see, in my heart and my head that idea was a given, that students were doing the work, but in classrooms, the teacher I'd coached so earnestly went into the explicit modeling so deeply that it crowded out the students' work time. Yikes! So I am saying it here: Your students need to do the work of the lesson, not you.

So this book is your guide for getting students to do the work. I am a teacher. My partner in life, my husband, is a coach. When he immigrated to the United States and had to learn English, he had coaches that helped him (he was an adult, and there were no teachers to help him then). He connected with people that coached him how to get another degree in the United States (in English, when he spoke Farsi); he connected with people that coached him to realize his dreams. He certainly had teachers along the way too, but the coaches, those people that gave him time to try on his own, to learn for himself by doing, were the people that helped him reach the American Dream. He coached competitive high school girls' soccer for years. We used to go out on the field at all hours of the day and his girls would play. I watched him coach these young women to win numerous championships over the fifteen years. I was fascinated by the coaching approach. He would teach but not tell. He would show but not bore. He would support but not enable. He stood by the team, pointing out what they did well when they executed a play and how a play went wrong. Sometimes he would point out that a play went wrong simply by how they held their bodies in relation to the ball. He coached, scaffolded, and nurtured, but he never *did* the playing for them, because he was the coach and not the player. He could not go in and play the game for them, and even if the girls copied him the first time they tried a new move, by the second or third try, they were starting to own the new move for themselves.

Coaches show us what to do then release, immediately, to let us try for ourselves. But they don't just let go; they stand beside us and watch us as we try, then they point out what we could do to keep getting better and also ask questions that help us reflect on what we learned from our own actions. Coaches rarely ask, "What did you learn from watching me?" because coaches know that idle hands don't lead to deep learning. They also know that hands (and feet) that copy don't learn without trying on their own first.

So with the gradual-release model—also known as the I Do, We Do, You Do sequence—we have to make sure it *doesn't* go like this: I do (for a long time or quickly, without a think-aloud, or loudly, if I am saying it for the umpteenth time as the students still didn't learn it). We do (for too long or too much, which seems almost like an I do again because, as the learner, I am just copying you without you letting me try it my own way, adding my own twist to help me own it). You do (for too short of a time, when just as I am starting to *get it*, it is time to move on to the next lesson because we spent too long in the I do and we do phases). I release you from this. Yes, me. I give myself the authority to do this, as I am going to suggest a new focus. Anne Lamott spoke at TED 2017 (Lamott, 2017a), and she spoke about things she knows for sure. One of those things is about helping our children. She says, "We can't run alongside our children with Chapstick and sunscreen on their hero's journey. You have to release them. It's disrespectful not to."

So if we think about this and our teaching, we have to stop running alongside with scaffolds that hurt and don't help. We have to release to independence. We have to release sooner in the lessons we teach. Anne Lamott goes on to say, " Our help is usually not very helpful. Our help is often toxic, and help is the sunny side of control." [Lamott, 2017a) Let's focus on not being toxic. Let's focus on not disguising our *control needs* in lessons and tasks and other classroom endeavors as *help*. We need a new focus.

The new focus is I do, you do (with me standing beside you coaching you), or I suggest, we do (quickly, just until you get it so we can move to you trying it yourself) and then you do.

Let's get started helping you ensure your students do the doing, not you. You work too hard as it is!

## Tasks and Coherence: What Research Has to Say

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The place I love to be most second to my classroom is *in someone else's* classroom learning. (Well, it is probably third best because my favorite place to be is home, and then in my classroom!) I love to learn as much as I take joy in helping others learn. In 2012, I had the opportunity to learn a lot about school coherence and tasks. At the university, I was part of a two-year professional learning opportunity called Building Coherence in Instructional Improvement (BCII), which was led by Richard Elmore, Michelle Foreman, and Leisy Stosich from Harvard. It was a powerful learning setting for me, as the Harvard team would fly to Fresno, California, to work with a coaching team and then with a school district. For me, it was a jump-up-and-down thrilling opportunity, as I had followed the work of Elmore for many years, and now I was working with Elmore and his team at my very own university.

In this project, I learned about how to help schools prepare for instructional improvement by considering the leadership practices of a school, examining the whole school improvement efforts and organizational processes, looking at the team processes and beliefs, and teaching for student learning. For me, the most powerful part of this the professional study was on helping teachers experiment with new ways of interacting with content and with students. Elmore, Foreman, and Stosich guided me and my colleagues to consider how to raise the level of academic tasks in order to do things: to make a difference with the connection of teachers with students and to make a stronger connection between students and the academic tasks. During this focus on coherence, we revisited the idea of tasks as defined by Elizabeth City: Academic tasks are what the students are actually doing during instruction, not what we hypothesize that they are doing. The more aligned our academic tasks are to high-quality implementation, the more students will learn (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

So it began. Tasks. In the work with Harvard, Elmore, Foreman, and Stosich, my team looked at the tasks students were completing in the classroom and helped teachers have conversations about the tasks they were assigning. All this consideration of tasks and how tasks lead to learning springboarded me to a great big idea: I would conduct my own research with students and find out what they thought about the reading and writing tasks they were doing in classrooms. So I launched into a large research project where I surveyed nearly seven hundred students about literacy tasks and interviewed thirty students about their thinking about reading and writing tasks in the classroom. The findings include the following: Tasks can be good and can be bad. Tasks can be mundane and tasks can be engaging. Tasks that are purposeful, appropriately scaffolded, and at the students' readiness level lead to student excitement, engagement, and most importantly, learning. I also learned that statistically significant numbers of students want to be involved in engaging tasks that give them ownership of their learning. I call these types of tasks *engagements*. I learned that statistically significant number of students in the study were read to or completed worksheets on reading but *did not* read in class and *did*

*not* want or *like* to read outside of class. Also, a statistically significant number of students did not use the most commonly taught reading comprehension strategies in or outside of class, and they wanted their teachers to teach them how, in essence to help them be able to do things on their own. In interviews, students told me about what kind of instruction they wanted to be part of. The students said they wanted teachers that believed that they were worthy of the work, to help them do the work on their own and to see them as people and as capable and to believe in them. When we focus on academic tasks where students are doing the doing, we squarely put student ownership of learning first.

## Academic Tasks: Reclaiming Them as Engaging Actions Students Do

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Cluttered curriculums can bog us down and make it hard to teach in the ways that we want—focused, purposeful, and productive. Having too much to do each day with students puts you in a race with yourself and your own skills to get it all done. Did you cover the standards today? Did you assign all workbook pages aligned to the books your students read? Did you correct all of the work produced by students at workstations? Did you read all their journal entries? We can get buried by the jobs we are giving students and not realize that we are wasting the most valuable resource available to us: time.

This book is about coaching students to learn for themselves. We do this day by day, hour by hour, as we instruct and interact with our students. The seventy-five tasks in the book are, in essence, what gets done on the journey of each school year and the longer journey of being a third grader reading *Junie B. Jones* and arduously writing a few sentences to being a literate adult whose life is enriched by her literacy.

My editor and I joke that I am hijacking the word task and redefining it for a new generation of teachers, getting rid of its heavy connotations of drudgery or teacher-directed, teacher-pleasing mindsets. Because the thing is, I think it's okay for teachers to give a task; that doesn't have to mean the student doesn't get enough choice or voice. I am talking about purposeful engagements—academic moves that carry your students away with their work in a way that they forget that they are working. I am talking about tasks that are wings to independence because they exercise the big and small skills and strategies that add up to a learner being able to tackle the major endeavors of literacy in every discipline. Some of the tasks in the book have the glamour and depth of a major endeavor (say, comparing two novels; designing an experiment that compares the drinking water in two adjacent but economically different towns), but many are the more workaday literacy pursuits that we all need to do the grander stuff. Here is a sampling:

*Identifying patterns in text*

*Collecting research and organizing research notes*

*Note taking in jots on complex text*

*Compare/contrast*

*Write an explanation*

So you see, in defining tasks, I've got a kind of high/low thing going—I want us to consider the quality of them, and I want to use tasks with the greatest degree of student choice and ownership possible (that's the “high”), but I also want to say with unabashed conviction that there are some times and some tasks that the whole class will do because they need practice with a particular skill. It augments the authentic unit of study but isn't necessarily fully

embedded in it. It's OK because the task is engaging, differentiated for the students, and leads to learning rather than busywork.

## Active Tasks–Not Passive Tasks

A good task inspires creativity and passion; at the very least, it will spark some interest and get the neurons in the brain firing, getting ready to learn. A good task once learned is then something a student can choose to do, when it seems natural to him. For example, on page 116 there is a task “Responding to Literature With Some Kick in It.” Once I have introduced the task and students have practiced it and explored it, it's up to them how they do it and how often. It would become a bad task if it were something they were compelled to do every day. A bad task dulls the senses, diminishes thinking, and decreases student passion to learn.

Engaging tasks sit at the center of the classroom dynamics and day-to-day routines. Tasks also create the glue that connects teacher and students. This is because, when the teacher works with students on learning, he is usually working on getting students to do something (a task) in order to get them to open up to new information, then practice doing something with that information (another task), so they can own the information or skill for themselves (an engagement). Engagements and tasks are the glue holding together the classroom community.

There are three premises to designing great tasks. The first premise to designing great tasks for your students is that the students should be “doing the doing.” The second premise is that students learn by doing. The third premise is that effort pays off. You won't be nurturing strong, independent learners in a classroom that fosters passivity. You *will* be nurturing strong, independent learners in a classroom that fosters independence! Some tasks we assign to students reinforce passive interactions: prepare, listen, watch, talk when called, and copy down what she writes on the board. There are differences between active and passive tasks; these differences focus on the type of activities students are doing. The *tasks* students are engaged in. Let's take a look at the following table.

A Comparison of Task Types	
Independence Fostering Tasks	Passivity Fostering Tasks
Students think about the previous night's homework.	Students prepare their notebooks to take notes.
Students talk about their reflections.	Students sit quietly while waiting for the teacher to start the lesson.
Students read with the teacher.	Students watch the teacher read.
Students read.	Students listen to the teacher read.
Students think about what is important in what they read reading.	Student think about what is important in what the teacher read.
Students write notes about what they think is important.	Teacher writes notes on the board about important ideas and details; students copy the notes.

In the end of this example, both groups of students have notes in their notebooks, but the process of getting the notes is qualitatively different. In the independence example, students actively engaged in the tasks and practiced on their own. In the passivity example, the students passively engaged (by watching and copying) and did not practice on their own. The active tasks evoke different thinking, reading, and writing skills than the passive tasks, and they are higher-level tasks where students apply close reading skills, sort and select information, synthesize information, and summarize. In the passive classroom example, these things are going on, but it is the teacher who is doing them (she is the expert) while the novice learners only watch.

## Every Day, Weekly, and Sometimes

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The tasks are arranged in sections. The first section is Everyday Tasks. The tasks in this section are activities you might do every single day in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The tasks in the everyday task section do not necessarily take as much time, thinking, or effort (for students of course!) as tasks that are considered weekly or occasional tasks. These are tasks that help with the smooth running of your classroom and of your literacy time. These are tasks students could and should be engaged in everyday.

The next section of the book is Weekly Tasks. The tasks in this section are harder to complete than the tasks in the daily task section. The tasks might occur over several days or might have precursor activities that take place before the students can work on the task being discussed. In essence, these are tasks that take different types of thinking than the tasks in the daily task section. They require deeper thinking, repeated attempts, and extended time to practice. Essentially, they build for students the ability to persevere.

The third section of the book is the Sometime Tasks. The tasks in this section are more difficult and take more time. Students may not be able to complete them in one day, or you might assign the tasks over time. These are tasks that students must persevere at; they take time. They take effort.

## The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

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Each section of the book ends with a chart called The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly. It's a blog-like review of implementing the tasks! I include it to show you how it looked when it went great, how it looked when it didn't go too well, and how it looked when it was downright horrible. I want you to see that guiding students toward independence is always a work in progress.

Now, let's get started. Enjoy.