

Innovations in Thinking and Learning

Marlene Scardamalia – Scaffolds and Theory Development

MARLENE: To develop a theory, I think you can also think of it as integrative thinking. You need to understand the ideas that exist, many of them in opposition with one another. But you've got to come to some higher place with those ideas, taking the very best of what's available, but also being aware of their weaknesses and moving forward.

Now, how do you bring such a capacity to the every day, every moment engagement of how teams operate? So the idea is that if you can embed these in the discourse, that you will be able to get these kinds of advances. So people thought we were out of our minds when we put the little scaffold that says "My theory, I need to understand a better theory is..." and have very, very young students use this, because of course they don't know what a theory is. And the literature suggests that this doesn't happen in high school, let alone in our elementary grades.

But we're not looking for the most profound theory when somebody says, "My theory." We're looking for the presentation of an idea, and other people have ideas. And then you start realizing, oh, lots of people have different theories. Do we have any evidence for any of our theories? And then you try to think about what could help us figure out which of our ideas makes a difference. So then you run an experiment, and then you discover whether that makes a difference or not. And then you learn that somebody else has a different idea. You're living the very culture by which theories advance.

So if we can take these forms of discourse that are very rare and bring them to the immediacy and everyday actions of people, then we ought to be able to take very rare forms of interaction and bring them together. As a matter of fact, I did a workshop with integrative thinking, where we simply took integrative thinking and built the scaffolds for integrative thinking. So the hypothesis, were we to run that experiment, is that integrative thinking would become so much a part of the classroom or any context, the in-school, out-of-school context, that forms of discourse become forms of thought through their use, through interaction with other people. And so that is what the scaffolds are to bring forms of thought that we tackle the ones that are rare, because of course the ones that are commonplace don't need the support. So we tackle very rare forms of thinking, and bring them to the everyday lives of students.