

Following the Breadcrumbs: Scaffolding in Microlearning

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If you've been reading the latest posts, you're now pretty well primed in microlearning, from what it is to where it fits in the learning lifecycle.

Because microlearning is a "hot" trend, there is some wiggle room around its design, implementation, and use. Yes, some aspects are constant (i.e., it reinforces specific skills), and some are, well... interpretive, like how many minutes constitute "short" bits of time.

Scaffolding (sequenced, leveled instruction that leads learners to mastery) falls into that last category. Ask a few digital learning specialists about where it rests in microlearning, and guess what? Yep, many will have different points of view, a few of which I will share here.

Where and When to Scaffold

Our ultimate goal is for learners to put into action what they have learned.

Scaffolded learning supports that goal through tasks that move learners from guided instruction to skills/knowledge application. But where does it fit in microlearning? Here are some guiding thoughts on the matter from several industry colleagues.

[Lindsay Kirsch](#), learning and performance specialist, believes microlearning units are built into a broader, scaffolded learning strategy, even if isolated as review/reinforcement tools.

"Similar to a marketing/content strategy," muses Kirsch, "you have a large compilation of learning components that can be dismantled (from a workshop or a course) and distributed as individual components."

[Scott McKenzie](#), director of channel sales of [ej4](#), agrees. "In the same capacity as any other learning format that is designed on the 'building-block' approach," says McKenzie, "it would be most difficult to instruct on some topic 'B' if the learner has not been instructed first on 'A'."

"Microlearning," explains [Vince Flango](#), project manager/principal instructional designer of [General Dynamics Information Technology](#), "can absolutely be used as an instructional method to move the student to a stronger understanding of the content and, finally, to greater independence in the learning process." He suggests making small learning chunks available in increasing levels of complexity.

"While microlearning should be self-contained independent units," Flango says, "it can be available for a progressive learning path. Learners who have a firmer grasp of the concept can skip the foundational microlearning courses and move to the more advanced ones, while those who feel they need more can take all of them."

[Intelligence by Design](#) CEO/Owner/Founder [Catherine Beggs-Hinkson](#), recommends pre-assessing learners to determine what they already know about a topic. That way, in a comprehensive, scaffolded course, they can bypass what is familiar to them in order to focus on new content, or even things they want to refresh. This should not happen, she cautions, when a new initiative or system is launched. It is assumed, in this case, that all content is unfamiliar territory and can only be absorbed by moving through an entire course.

Reflecting: the Relationship Between Scaffolding and Microlearning

There are definitely similarities across these perspectives on scaffolding. But, there is some play in how microlearning fits within the structure. Beggs-Hinkson attributes this to differences among organizational, employee, and client needs that frame the design and delivery of course content.

I love how Bruno Winck captures microlearning as a form of scaffolding in his blog entry "[Digging into Micro-Learning](#)." It visualizes the structure, a good guide for all of us.

Says Winck: "For me, microlearnings are like the stations of his subway map. They should offer enough indications to make sense of where we are and why we should continue learning. They serve as a persistent hub toward more resources or heading to another microlearning. It's like exiting the station and exploring the neighborhood or taking a connecting journey."

Resources

[Scaffolding Learning for Novices, Amateurs, and Experts](#), E-Learning Faculty Modules, [Web site]

[Supporting Self-Directed Learning](#), this piece provides a solid overview of scaffolding in general, with examples of tools that provide scaffolded learning opportunities.

[e-Scaffolding](#), this infographic offers a scaffolding roadmap and identifies potential slots for microlearning that supports learners as they build their skills and knowledge.