

**Designing the Task of Teaching Novice Teachers How to Design Instructional Tasks**

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### Abstract

In this chapter the author outlines a process for teaching novice English teachers how to design units of instruction in the discipline of English (literature, composition, and language). Rejecting the forced choice between purportedly dichotomous structuralist and unfettered approaches to instructional design, the chapter argues for a middle ground, adopting a “structured process” approach to providing instructional blueprints that enable both teachers and students room to improvise and reinvent the curriculum in personalized ways that are responsive to emerging contingencies. The chapter details the components of units of instruction designed according to these principles and illustrates them with preservice teachers’ work.

### **Designing the Task of Teaching Novice Teachers How to Design Instructional Tasks**

During my attainment of two graduate degrees at the University of Chicago during the 1970s and 1980s, I was taught instructional design principles that had been made famous by current and former members of Chicago's Department of Education faculty. Ralph Tyler (1949) had provided a flexible template for instructional design that included setting objectives, selecting learning experiences, organizing instruction, and evaluating progress and revising plans accordingly. The integration of these ideas into a well-informed plan allowed for the alignment of teaching and assessment with what thoughtful adults considered to be the most worthwhile instructional goals and most efficacious learning experiences for their students.

Benjamin Bloom (1956) shortly thereafter more specifically addressed the question of how to identify educational objectives, those material products that instruction should lead students toward as the endpoint and manifestation of their learning. The idea that thinking about what students should be able to demonstrate and produce from their learning, and having the production of those texts serve as the goal toward which instruction should aim, struck me at the time as eminently sensible. The book through which I learned how to teach the academic discipline of English/Language Arts (Hillocks, McCabe, & McCampbell, 1971)—taught by first author George Hillocks in my M.A.T. program courses—applied those principles to the design of instructional units that provided students with strategies for producing the culminating texts that embodied their learning in relation to the focal concept of the unit.

I employed these design principles throughout my teaching career from 1976-1990, and found that they provided an excellent framework for designing instruction and accompanying tasks so that all of my teaching was aligned with the learning I anticipated they would produce through texts that synthesized their learning. Imagine my surprise, then,

when I learned from others in the field that Tyler, Bloom, and others working in the tradition I had embraced were believed to be rigid and out of date. Instruction, many told me, needed to be open-ended and entirely student-directed. By imposing objectives on them, I was not teaching them useful and re-usable strategies that enabled them to complete complex tasks confidently, as I believed. Rather, I learned that I was hegemonically imposing my own priorities and values on students who might wish to direct their learning elsewhere. People like me, with our strictures and structures, were doing students harm by telling them what they needed to learn and how they should go about producing the products of their learning. One of my professors in my doctoral studies, in whose Judd Hall office was displayed a historic bust of John Dewey, who founded the Chicago Department of Education in 1895, called Tyler's book "garbage" and stated that it was absolutely useless in thinking about how to educate students well.

In conjunction with the idea of systematically-designed instruction dedicated toward the teaching and learning of procedures for engaging with disciplinary expectations, another now-hoary idea, task analysis, was offered by Gagné (1963) as a means of providing clear direction for learners in relation to instructors' goals. Jonassen, Tessmer, and Hannum (1999) assert that "task analysis is the single most important component process in instructional design process, whether that process is used to produce direct instruction, performance support, or constructivist learning environments" in spite of a paucity of literature on how to conduct it, a problem that in turn renders task analysis "the most often misconstrued, misinterpreted, poorly executed, or simply ignored component of the instructional design process" (p. vii). They define task analysis as

a process of analyzing and articulating the kind of learning that you expect the learners to know how to perform. Instructional designers perform task analysis in order to determine:

- the goals and objectives of learning
- the operational components of jobs, skills, learning goals or objectives, that is, to describe what task performers do, how they perform a task or apply a skill and how they think before, during, and after learning
- what knowledge states (declarative, structural, and procedural knowledge) characterize a job or task
- which tasks, skills, or goals ought to be taught, that is, how to select learning outcomes that are appropriate for instructional development
- which tasks are most important—which have priority for a commitment of training resources
- the sequence in which tasks are performed and should be learned and taught.
- how to select or design instructional activities, strategies, and techniques to foster learning
- how to select appropriate media and learning environments
- how to construct performance assessments and evaluation. (p. 3)

Task analysis, too, became a target of scorn and dismissal among those to whom specifying the process for engaging in disciplinary ways of thinking served to limit those students whose originality might be thwarted by having learning procedures imposed on them that might not fit their styles and purposes.

In spite of this resistance, I always endorsed the fundamental principles of curriculum and instruction design available through these mid-century sources, and as a teacher and teacher educator, began writing about instructional design employing their tenets. I wrote or co-authored three books that put those design features into practice in the teaching of secondary school English (Smagorinsky, 2002, 2008; Smagorinsky & Gevinson, 1989), using them throughout my career as a university teacher educator beginning in 1990.

Meanwhile, I began hearing echoes of Tyler and Bloom in conversations around me. The idea of “backward planning”—beginning with the endpoint of instruction (what Bloom and Tyler would call objectives and what Gagné would call the task) and designing instruction that leads to it—entered the vernacular and once again began to make sense to teachers who had become frustrated with instructional approaches that were so open-ended that many students weren’t quite sure what to do when entrusted with being in charge of their own learning, and so did what they felt like doing whether it advanced their academic or personal learning or not. Not all students are able and willing, it began to appear, to identify the compositional needs that would serve their futures well or figure out for themselves the pathways that they needed to produce texts that met the expectations of the communities of practice into which they hoped to enter their thinking.

The dilemma produced through this fundamental tension lay between what might be called the Romanticism of the wholly student-generated curriculum advocated by critics of Tyler, Bloom, Gagné, and their structuralist ilk and the evident need for some sort of instructional direction for the many students who had trouble constructing their own educational journeys without the sort of teacher interference criticized by Graves (1983), Atwell (1987), and other advocates of nondirectional teaching. The dichotomy available through the forced choice imposed on educators between these two irreconcilable poles further obscured the possibility that a synthesis might be available in which the possibility of student choice remains in play within a structured approach that enables students’ engagement through activities designed to enable them to inductively develop procedures for carrying out the task. The task analysis in this sense does not begin with the abstraction of a learning pathway, but rather places learners in activities that require them to think in particular ways (Hillocks, 1995). Indeed, Atwell, an influential proponent of writing workshops in which students choose their own topics and processes, herself became an

advocate of greater instructional structure in a major revision of her teaching approach (Atwell, 1998).

They might thus learn argumentation skills, for instance, by being initially presented with accessible problems about which to argue—e.g., which cell phone serves their needs best—and having them talk through the issues to resolve the question. By then having students reflect back on which arguments were most persuasive, students could participate in the task analysis as a consequence of reflecting on the arguments that they and their peers forward in a debate that has some authenticity to them and considering which means of argumentation they found the most persuasive. That approach, originally referred to by Hillocks (1986) as an environmental mode with an inquiry focus, was in turn dubbed by Applebee (1986) as a *structured process* approach, a term my colleagues and I in turn have adopted to refer to the way in which we have learned to teach writing to middle and high school students (Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2010).

A structured process approach is founded in the idea that kids learn well when actively engaged with things that interest them. Further, and germane to this volume, teaching and learning are task-oriented under the assumption that learning how to argue and produce argumentative writing require a different set of goals, procedures, and conventions than does learning how to imagine, construct, tell, and write a satirical story. The nature of the task, and often the social dimension of which community of thought and its accompanying expectations the task is designed to engage with, suggest what learners need to know in order to produce an effective text in relation to a given task.

Learning begins with activity, rather than through a teacher's abstract presentation of information, as is often the case in school. Teachers design and sequence activities that allow students to move through increasingly challenging problems of the same type, e.g., moving from arguing about the best cell phone for their needs to arguing about less accessible, more

complex problems such as which character in Arthur Miller's drama *Death of a Salesman* is most admirable. Their learning is highly social, involving continual talk with one another as they engage with a problem, produce verbal solutions, reflect back on which solutions gained them the most in terms of their goals, and thus learn procedures and strategies for undertaking specific tasks in relation to particular communities of engagement. Although the teacher might identify the task (e.g., writing an argument) and design activities that enable students to argue about increasingly complex problems, most of the talking and doing comes from the students, whose activity in turn generates the standards that their own texts must meet.

This approach thus involves both instructional, task-based design of a learning structure and appropriate activities, and considerable student choice and direction within those parameters. A student would need to produce writing and thinking of the sort involved in the activities. The procedures involved in debating the ideal cell phone, for instance, would not call for the production of a sonnet or film review. Students would, however, have considerable latitude in the conclusions drawn and the particular claims and evidence that individual students believe buttress their argument most effectively. The structured process approach thus provides resolution to an unnecessary dispute over whether students should have choice or not, given that the teaching method is task-oriented yet inductive and flexible in conduct.

Learning design principles based on unit organization was very beneficial to my high school teaching career. While I obsessively thought about my teaching and was constantly tinkering with my plans, I was not plagued by daily uncertainty because I had learned to plan ahead and design conceptual units. I therefore found teaching to be less stressful than many of my colleagues because I was not always struggling to figure out what to do next. I was also happier with my teaching because my students saw continuity in what we did from day



to day and week to week, and saw it within the context of questions that mattered to them. In various units, we considered questions such as

- What does it mean to be a success?
- What does one do in the face of peer pressure?
- How does discrimination affect society and its individuals?
- What is a social conscience, and at what point and in what form does one register a protest against a social wrong?
- How does it feel to be an outcast?

I should also add that taking this approach made my classes far more interesting to me, because the answers were different for each class. Rather than explaining the same interpretation to students class after class, year after year, and having them repeat it to me on tests, I had the opportunity to be involved in discussions that were as infinitely varied as the students themselves. My classes were places where I did a lot of learning as I listened to my students construct for themselves an awareness of how they understood and acted within their worlds.

### **Using a Structured Process Approach to Teach Task Design to Novice Teachers**

In 1990 I changed venues, ending the high school English teaching career I'd begun in 1976 and becoming a teacher educator at the University of Oklahoma. Before my arrival, the English teaching methods course had been taught in the Department of English by a man who had, many years before, taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade English but who had been a college composition director for much of his adult life. I was housed in the College of Education, where I inherited his course that taught novice teachers how to teach the domain of English. Historically, the English curriculum has been centered around literature, writing, and language (typically grammar), although it has more recently been expanded to include other semiotic communications systems: film, graphic novels, digital composing, music, and other

compositional tools through which texts can be created and understood. Because I had found my own teaching preparation to be highly effective in enabling me to plan task-based instruction, I sought to recreate a similar experience for my preservice and inservice teachers in my teacher education courses, believing that it would equip them with methods of designing instructional tasks that would serve them well throughout their careers.

What, I needed to understand, did my students need to know how to do in order to teach English successfully? Their courses in the Department of English served the purpose of providing them with appropriate content knowledge of canonical literature produced in Great Britain and the US, with special attention to Shakespeare, and also of exposing them to some portion of the infinite availability of “world” literature—that from outside the English-language canon. They were also required to take courses in first-year composition, like all university students. My role was to provide my teacher education students with pedagogical preparation in how to take that content knowledge—along with other content available to middle and high school students—and design instruction through which their students could engage fruitfully with the curriculum and instruction.

In my view, based on what I had learned while learning to teach and while being a practicing teacher for 14 years, the most useful skill that I could teach prospective teachers was what my colleagues and I refer to as *conceptual units of instruction*. Such instruction orchestrates the reading and composition of texts from the curriculum around a major concept that might center on a theme (e.g., Coming of Age, Gender Roles, Success), genre or archetype (e.g., the Trickster, the Detective Story, Persuasion), a movement (e.g., Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Naturalism), a strategy (e.g., understanding irony, reading media, understanding narrative perspective), a literary period (e.g., the British Victorian Period, the US Jazz Age, the British Restoration), regional theme (e.g., the British Lake Poets, authors of the US South, a local sense of place), or the work of an author (e.g.,

Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, Emily Dickinson). The major task for the students would be to produce a 4-6 unit of instruction on a concept from these categories (see [http://smago.coe.uga.edu/VirtualLibrary/Unit\\_Outlines.htm](http://smago.coe.uga.edu/VirtualLibrary/Unit_Outlines.htm) for examples and resources for designing such units). The major task for me as their professor is in turn to teach them how to produce the major text for the methods class, the complete conceptual unit of instruction. If the idea of planning backward has currency, then beginning with an understanding of the endpoint of instruction in turn suggests what my teaching toward that end should encompass.

Conceptual units are defensible for many reasons. Many argue that effective instruction seeks to help students make connections across texts and discussions. Applebee (1996), for instance, sees the curriculum “as a domain for culturally significant conversations” (p. 200), suggesting the need to explore a set of questions across a series of related texts. Conceptual units are well-suited for integrated learning, enabling students to explore a topic over time through a variety of texts.

Csikszentmihalyi and Larson’s (1984) study of adolescents focused on identifying the kinds of experiences that put them *in the flow*, a state in which they were so heavily involved in what they were doing that they lost all track of time. Through engagement with provocative texts, students can undertake a strong literary education through which they participate in and contribute to a major tradition in arts and letters. It can further enable them to experience this tradition in a way that allows them to understand the social conditions, life experiences, and literary conventions that guide the production of literature and other texts and help them serve as vehicles for their growth into happy, productive citizens.

Conceptual units are also compatible with *schema theory* that sees knowledge connected through networks of associations. Schematic knowledge enables a person to understand situations that are new yet related to ones already known. An effectively designed conceptual unit helps students understand new material that is related to familiar material.

Prior knowledge from personal experience can form the basis for understanding how a unit concept works in newly-encountered literature, film, and art. These texts can in turn provide the basis for reflection on the prior experiences. Each text can further serve to develop a schema that in turn helps a reader to understand both the experiences that are at the heart of the theme and the textual conventions that authors use to help convey a theme. By organizing literature according to engaging concepts, teachers can help students refine their schemata for both their own unfolding experiences and their knowledge of textual conventions.

### **The Culminating Task for the Course**

I have taught what is commonly called “the methods course” for preservice English teachers in both undergraduate and master of arts in teaching (MAT)—which involves certification at the master’s level for students who did not major in education as undergraduates—degree programs nearly every year since 1990, and sometimes twice a year. Over the near-quarter-century that I have taught this course, first at Oklahoma and since 1998 at The University of Georgia, the fundamental principles of the course have remained intact, even as I have made modifications to the texts I have used and the specific ways in which I have taught each semester’s students.

I have tried to teach the course so that my own methods of teaching my university students map comfortably onto the approach involved in the methods I promote for their instruction in grades 6-12. There are obvious differences that I need to acknowledge. In particular, we teach groups of different size and composition. The size of my methods class is capped at 25 students, and in many years my classes have enrolled fewer than 20 students, while those my students will teach in schools typically exceed 25 students and often enroll 35. Further, the composition of my classes in universities includes only students who have been vetted through the initial university admissions process and then a second screening for admissions to the English Education program after two years of success in college

coursework, who are 7 or more years older than typical secondary school students and thus more mature, and who seek to be educators for their livelihoods. In contrast, my university students will generally teach in comprehensive public high schools that admit all students, and even require their attendance whether they wish to be there or not, no matter how well prepared for and dedicated to academic success they might be, and how well they are supported at home.

The course objective (using Bloom's terminology) or goal (to use the term I've substituted to avoid unnecessary conflicts with people who find the term outdated) is to produce a culminating text that we refer to as a conceptual unit of instruction that is focused on a concept that I assume is either of relevance to the group of students being taught (e.g., a unit on Rites of Passage for high school sophomores) or serves an unanticipated need that will serve them well over time (e.g., a unit on strategies for reading poetry, with materials adjusted for the age group and level of preparation with which the students arrive). My task is thus twofold: to teach them how to design a unit that serves their instructional ends, and to teach them so that my own instruction adheres to the same instructional principles that I emphasize to them. If my task is for the students to produce a well-unified, conceptually important unit design, what then are my responsibilities as their teacher to design my own class so that they learn it well?

### **Task Analysis**

The task of constructing a conceptual unit of instruction involves the production of a set of related pieces. Although the process of unit construction is recursive and rarely proceeds for all people in the same distinct order, it is useful to sort out what a teacher needs to produce in order for a unit to comprehensively meet all of the students' instructional needs and the teacher's preparatory needs. A conceptual unit typically includes the following: a rationale, goals, assessments, lessons, activities, discussions, texts, tools, and compositions.

**Rationale.** A rationale is the argument that justifies the teacher's selection of a unit topic and its contents: its materials, activities, assessments, and so on. Writing this rationale out is the most effective way of articulating reasons for teaching decisions. All teachers eventually must defend their decisions to their colleagues, their students' parents, their administrators, and other stakeholders. I recommend to preservice teachers that they employ some combination of the following areas of justification for their teaching:

- *psychology/human development:* What developmental needs might a conceptual unit serve? A unit on Coming of Age, for instance, might parallel life issues facing ninth-grade students; while a unit on Social Responsibility might relate well to issues faced by juniors engaging with the more political literature in an American Literature course.
- *cultural significance:* Students can benefit from understanding cultural factors in societal organization and processes. They might engage with culture at the local, national, or distant levels. Learning about a local culture can help establish a sense of pride and identity between students and their communities, and further to help students critique local cultures and consider how they might change for the better. A national culture might be at work in literature concerned with a phenomenon or myth such as the American Dream and how it is and is not realized in such works as Richard Wright's *Native Son*. A distant culture might exist next door or across the globe, depending on what the point of difference is. A unit centered on *Colonialism*, for instance, might explore works that question the historical effort to expand economic and political influence to new areas and what the moral and social consequences of such imperialistic ambition might be.
- *literary significance:* Teachers often justify topic and text selection on the basis that the literature is of sufficient greatness that it must be read. This rationale often

motivates decisions to teach Shakespeare as central to understanding the themes of Western culture and the metaphors that are invoked to explain it.

- *civic awareness*: Some units might be taught in order to help students understand their roles as citizens in their communities, states, and nation through knowledge of their history, laws, customs, rights, and responsibilities, and the application of that knowledge to act responsibly for a more equitable, democratic, and dynamic society. These units might be centered on such topics such as *Justice*, *Social Responsibility*, *Protest Literature*, and others.
- *current social problem*: A unit can be defended according to the ways it helps adolescents understand and make choices about problems they face in their lives, such as the ways in which bullying and peer pressure produce unhealthy conduct among young people. The problem might be local, such as when a community has experienced a natural disaster—flooding, wind damage, fire—and *Coping with Loss* would help them experience it. Or it might be broader in scope, such as an exploration of *Progress and Technology* in a society in which many believe that technological advances create distance between and among people.
- *preparation for future needs*: Much of what teachers do in the classroom is in preparation for what they think students need later in school and life. They might teach in anticipation of what colleges will expect of their students, assuming that most will go on to tertiary education, and so teach them strategies for reading *Satire*. Or they might believe that society cannot endure continued inequity and so teach a unit on *Effects of Discrimination* to pave the way for a more compassionate society in the future.
- *relevance*: Especially in a school in which students are disaffected from their studies, relevance to students' interests and personal situations can be justified. Relevance

often follows from finding a correspondence between students' current life situations and the actions of characters in the texts they experience. Texts that treat the most vivid concerns of youth can be problematic in many schools in which topics of drugs, alcohol, sex, and violence are taboo; and yet such issues often form the core of works of young adult literature. Even without such topics, more mature students might relate to a unit on *Protest Literature* during times when local or national policies are widely criticized and they themselves are seeking appropriate outlets for their dissatisfaction with authority.

- *alignment with standards*: The last few decades have seen a proliferation with “standards” movements that embody a group’s beliefs about the proper content of an education. Teachers can justify their decisions according to how well their instruction helps their students to meet whatever standards they are required to meet, such as teaching a unit on *Persuasion* in order to meet the US Common Core State Standards’ emphasis on analytic writing.

**Goals and assessments.** Instructional goals refer to the unit’s destination, the culminating product that students will generate in order to demonstrate their learning. This final assessment, in my view, ought to serve as a learning opportunity, rather than simply as a test of content mastery; each assessment should provide an occasion for new learning as students extend their thinking through the process of generating a unit’s culminating text. Most commonly these texts are some kind of extended writing, such as an essay, a narrative, a research report, and other texts (including nonverbal products) that require them to synthesize knowledge.

Goals are tied to the inevitable question of *assessment* in that teachers will need to evaluate the degree to which the students’ work meets some performance standard. Although some find grading rubrics to be limiting, I think that it is important to think about how



grading distinctions will be applied to variations in student work, and that anticipating these distinctions ahead of time can both inform instruction (in that the rubric can identify areas of instructional emphasis), help students understand expectations, and enable some degree of fairness in assessment.

The approach to unit design that I endorse relies on the identification of the major texts that students will produce prior to designing the instruction that leads to them. I recommend that the typical unit include three types of major goals, stated as assignments through which students will be assessed: one formal piece of writing (a narrative, an extended definition, a research paper, or other writing within conventional school genres), one informal text (a reading log, a personal journal, a writer's notebook, or other exploratory text), and one creative and/or multimodal text (a collaborative dramatic interpretation, an interpretive song or soundtrack, a digital production, or other text drawing on the full range of semiotic possibilities). Students thus continually explore ideas in low-stakes environments, learn the sorts of textual conventions that serve them well in formal learning and performance environments, and exercise choice in how they might depict their understanding in ways that formal and written compositions do not afford them.

**Lessons.** Although “lesson” can carry authoritarian baggage, it needn't. A lesson is simply a shorter unit of instruction within the larger conceptual unit. If, for instance, a teacher of seventh graders has planned a unit on Animals as Symbols that includes the goal of enabling students to see how symbolic animals can represent human characteristics, she can include a lesson in which students are introduced to the idea that literary animals can symbolize people and their (often negative) tendencies. Each lesson should be integrated and sequenced in relation to the flow and direction of the unit as a whole.

**Activities.** An activity is a hands-on experience that is related to the unit concepts and helps to prepare students for reaching the unit goals. It typically involves an open-ended task

that includes interaction, the manipulation of ideas and/or objects, the production of a text or conclusion to report, and the inductive development of strategies for learning. Students engaged in a unit on *Gender Roles*, for instance, might form small groups in which they study and discuss a series of examples of workplace relationships in order to come to conclusions about ways in which people of different sexuality conduct themselves and are treated in high-stakes settings. From there they can report their findings to the class for further discussion, produce a text that depicts their understanding of the social dynamics, or otherwise extend their thinking by engaging it further with their classmates.

**Discussion.** Discussion involves the verbal exchange of ideas in ways that are open-ended within a task structure (that is, organized around a common purpose yet not having a specific or correct answer or destination), authentic (that is, concerned with the purposes and interests of all participants, not just a few), and democratic (that is, equally open to all and involving the greatest possible number of willing participants). They might take place with the whole class or within small groups. They might be conducted around an abstraction or be generated through activities employing concrete materials.

**Texts.** A text is a product such as a literary work, art, dance, film, and other artifact that has a meaning potential. Textual selection often comes within the confines of a prescribed curriculum, even as it may be expanded in relation to the interests of teachers and students. Prospective teachers need to consider the texts and related materials that students will engage with during the unit. These texts need to be related to the unit's focus, be appropriate for school use (a challenge that requires some new thinking for those unaccustomed to the sorts of censorship that govern the conduct of school), be appropriate to the age and preparation levels of the students, and provide a potentially compelling means of engagement so as to produce the highest possible interest and motivation to explore the units themes and strategic imperatives. They also must be available within the school's provisions

and resources; selecting a book that that school does not make available would require costs that most schools would discourage.

### **Teaching the Task of Unit Design**

I have thus far elaborated on the task my methods course is designed to teach, providing a brief rationale for why I believe that unit design is an important procedure for prospective teachers to learn and identifying the aspects of unit design that I need to emphasize in my course. My approach to teaching the course follows from this preliminary analysis.

When I began teaching methods classes in 1990, I tried to accomplish too much, adding in tasks like an analysis of current literature anthologies, the production of one in-class unit as practice and one “official” unit for formal evaluation, and other assignments. I eventually began removing anything from the course that did not directly inform my students’ learning of unit design. After nearly a quarter-century, the class now includes fewer requirements, and more time to focus on them. Learning procedures for unit design is quite difficult and takes a whole semester of patience on my part and dedication on theirs. Ultimately, this “less is more” approach has produced better work from my students, although my experience in teaching the course has undoubtedly produced other adjustments that have benefitted my students.

I next outline how I go about the complex and difficult task of teaching people a completely new kind of thinking and writing. My preservice teachers typically come from a humanities background and are accustomed to belletristic reading and writing. Unit design, in contrast, is relatively terse and perspicacious. It also involves a sort of planning that they typically have never engaged in or, for that matter, been exposed to. Even when they see the logic behind the approach, it often takes a lot of time and discussion to become conversant with the principles of practice taught in my course.

**Models of units.** Although the use of model essays is often criticized in the teaching of writing, and has fared poorly in comparative empirical studies of methods of teaching writing (Hillocks, 1986), I find that using model units is important in teaching unit design, given that few preservice teachers have either seen or written one. I have concluded that the use of model essays in and of itself is not a bad idea; the problem is when they are simply offered as exemplary with no accompanying procedural instruction. Working dialectically with models and procedural knowledge, however, provides my students both with a good sense of what they are working toward and a process for how to get there. Toward that end, I began compiling online all of the units that my students have written since I moved to Georgia in 1998 and the Internet became more useful with increased broadband width and other affordances. They are now available to my students and other practicing and beginning teachers in a Virtual Library of Conceptual Units at [http://smago.coe.uga.edu/VirtualLibrary/Unit\\_Outlines.htm](http://smago.coe.uga.edu/VirtualLibrary/Unit_Outlines.htm). As is often the case when an old idea is abandoned and then revived, perhaps some re-branding of models is in order, as when the much-maligned *objectives* were resuscitated as “backward planning” from instructional endpoints and when *outlines* were verboten only to be revived as “clustering” and “webbing.” Instead of calling them *models*, then, I’ll refer to the units in the Virtual Library as “mentor texts” that I use in my class as we work through the process of unit design.

**Workshop setting.** Borrowing from Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1989), I consider my classroom to be a *construction zone*, a workshop during which my students use class time to discuss unit design, bring in drafts of their work, get feedback, and discuss how to improve what they’ve written. With the whole of the semester dedicated to the single task of designing a conceptual unit of instruction, the class is focused on the process of planning a concept-centered inquiry into a topic that is appropriate to the students that my preservice teachers anticipate they will be teaching.

The class is highly collaborative, with much of each session taking place in small groups chosen by the students. They are also allowed to collaborate on the units that they develop for the course, with no credit subtracted for the decision to work with someone on unit design. Students have worked in groups of up to four students for their course units, although I prefer that they have a maximum of three so that each person makes substantial contributions.

Students are strongly encouraged to bring laptop computers or tablets to class so that they may draw on the full range of resources available to them from either my syllabus website at [http://smago.coe.uga.edu/ELAN7408/ELAN7408\\_syllabus.htm](http://smago.coe.uga.edu/ELAN7408/ELAN7408_syllabus.htm) or whatever else the Internet provides for teachers, often through links available from the pages in my online syllabus. They can thus share manuscript drafts as email attachments during the process of reviewing one another's work, borrowing one another's ideas, and making suggestions on any aspect of unit design.

Because the class encourages collaboration, my preservice teachers learn that teaching, rather than being the solitary enterprise assumed by many (e.g., Bullough, 1989), is in contrast a highly social profession in which sharing teaching ideas represents common and respected professional conduct. Teaching is thus different from many professions in what Wertsch (1998) calls the *copyright age*, in which credit for ideas presumably goes to the originator for financial gain. Rather, teachers often plan by synthesizing ideas collected from elsewhere into a coherent unit plan, relying more on novel adaptations and juxtapositions of teaching ideas than the creation of whole new lessons and activities, even as such creative planning is encouraged in the course.

**Unit components.** The course proceeds through unit design in a series of steps that has both linear and nonlinear aspects. I supplemented the text that I wrote in order to teach the course effectively (Smagorinsky, 2008) with a second book coauthored with friends from

my Chicago program focused on the teaching of writing (Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2010) so that preservice teachers could include systematic writing instruction related to the unit concepts in their designs. In these books we focus both on the whole of the tasks of unit and writing instruction design, and on the subtasks involved in producing whole designs.

For some of the components, I rely on what I assume that my university students—who are either seniors with strong English backgrounds or graduate students seeking certification following a major in English, journalism, or other relevant field—have learned through their prior education. The writing of a rationale, for instance, relies on knowledge of how to produce argumentation. As many have noted (e.g., the contributors to Bazerman & Paradis, 1989), while argumentation may have a set of general features such as the generation of claims and examples that are warranted such that they serve an evidentiary role, specific communities of readers have particular expectations for how such arguments unfold—what counts as evidence, which points are worth making, what writing style and emotional valence are appropriate, and so on. I position their rationales as justifications presented to angry parents, concerned school board members, impuissant administrators, and others who might question their decisions such that they may teach their units once they are in schools and do so with a strong defense of their decisions. Anticipating these possible critics thus serves as an argumentative nuance that I help them imagine as they talk through their rationales and get feedback before submitting them.

Students produce components of the unit over the course of the semester, with me grading them after they have had opportunities for peer feedback and revisions; and they may revise and resubmit each component until they are satisfied with the result. That way they cannot put off the immense task of designing a whole unit until the last minute, and can get

feedback and opportunities to revise each piece in a more gradual, less intensive, more supportive fashion that is often the case in university course assignments.

Another major component is the identification of materials, which again the students generate in small group settings. University students often forget that what seems to be a good idea in a university may be a terrible idea in a school. Reading a book that includes graphic sex, violence, and drug usage might work in a university English class, but might get one fired in the more hypersensitive setting of the public school. In groups, then, students identify the texts that would work for each unit under consideration, with attention to providing variation in authorial race, ethnicity, gender, perspective, national identity, and other factors; and variation in textual type and genre such that students explore an idea through a mix of media: poetry, fiction, drama, digital texts, and whatever else the students in my class see as fitting for the students they envision for their instruction.

The identification of the course goals—a.k.a. objectives—is a new task for most prospective teachers, and relies on both modeling and group practice in phrasing. I recommend that my students phrase their unit goals as assignments to students, which requires another shift in audience. How can a task be specified to young people so that they know what is expected of them? As I have reviewed, I recommend that a unit include formal writing, informal writing, and creative text production. Each of these relies on different levels of specificity, and relies on a different sort of value system embedded in the accompanying rubric. In the workshop setting of the classroom, the students work across the unit goals as described in the book I wrote for the course, the unit goals as written by previous students and available in the Virtual Library, and the ideas they generate in relation to their specific unit topics to phrase assignments and differentiate performance levels in rubrics.

Yet a third audience is necessary to produce the most challenging aspect of a unit, the daily plans. I tell my students to imagine that they will take a sick or maternity leave, and

want their classes taught as well as possible. What would they leave to a substitute teacher so that the class is taught with the greatest fidelity to their intentions imaginable? Several weeks are dedicated to this challenge during the semester, with the workshop setting allowing for exploring ideas, developing the good ones, refining them, sequencing them such that the unit builds in challenge and complexity over the course of the 4-6 weeks, and arriving at the best of what's available during our brief time together.

### **Conclusion**

It is often the case that early in the semester, some of my students express the belief that they will never design a unit as good as the ones they see in the Virtual Library. I've had grown men in tears at the difficulty of the task they face as novices. And yet by the end, every student I've taught has delivered, and the vast majority of them have made proud additions to the Library's contents. I often provide the class with commentary on my own design of the class so that they see the relation between what I advocate that they do and what I try to do in teaching them how to design their own units. My university teaching tends to represent a departure from what they have experienced in classes where the teacher primarily lectures on an area of expertise and students take one big test or write one big paper at the end to demonstrate their learning. Because I see learning as an extended process both for my students and for theirs, I see the long-term, process-oriented, workshop-based approach I have developed as serving their needs for learning the task of designing instructional tasks much better.



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