

Constructing An Engaged Classroom: A review of Peter Smagorinsky's *Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry out Instructional Unit*

In his latest work, *Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry out Instructional Units*, Peter Smagorinsky offers a work that beautifully blends the genres of methods texts, often intended solely for preservice teachers, and instructional guide-books, equally often intended primarily for experienced teachers looking to rejuvenate their own classroom practices. Through recollections of his own teaching experiences, as well as observations made as a researcher in the field, and shared experiences offered by colleagues in both domains, Smagorinsky weaves a tapestry that ties the theoretical foundation of the traditional university-based methods course and pragmatic, experience-based classroom practice into a complex whole for everyone interested in become a more effective instructor in the English Language Arts classroom.

[...]this text provides a view of instructional design through a Vygotskian, social constructivist lens grounded in improving student learning by considering the “personal experiences” (p.3) and “ways of knowing” (p. 3), students bring with them to the classroom, including their race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation.

For those familiar with Smagorinsky's work,

it should come as no surprise that this text provides a view of instructional design through a Vygotskian, social constructivist lens grounded in improving student learning by considering the “personal experiences” (p.3) and “ways of knowing” (p. 3), students bring with them to the classroom, including their race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation. Of course, it goes without saying that many of these same “ways of knowing” were, until quite recently, ignored by a canon loaded primarily by old dead white guys. Through this lens Smagorinsky offers in depth analysis of the value of and reasoning behind creating instructional units and answers not only the “why,” but most usefully the “how” in redesigning the English Language Arts classroom.

Teaching English by Design accomplishes this task in several ways. First the author reveals the disjuncture between the method by which people naturally learn and the mode in which they are often subjected to being taught. Secondly, he deconstructs the “transmission” model of teaching still prevalent today and replaces it with a social constructivist pedagogy that considers and relies on the social and cognitive processes by which people learn. Lastly, for those looking for a ready-made teaching unit that can be implemented in the classroom tomorrow, he offers a “how to” clinic on unit planning with a step-by-step examination of the design process for a curriculum envisioned through a social constructivist framework

that considers both audience and rationale throughout.

By highlighting the dissonance between what we know to be a natural learning style and the too typical generalized, if traditional and conformist, curricula in place in most systems, Smagorinsky offers the reader a quick, clean, and theoretically sound introduction to the merits of adopting a social constructivist pedagogy. Along the way, the author regularly reminds us how such a pedagogy inherently accounts for the plurality of the modern day classroom and the multiplicity of modes by which students make and then demonstrate cognitive meaning. However, I think it equally important to note that while built on social constructivist theory, this is not a book **about** social constructivism. In fact the author spends little time describing social constructivism to the reader, instead assuming a general knowledge of that theory throughout the book. Conceivably, one could conclude one's reading of *Teaching English by Design* with no deeper an understanding of the actual theory of social constructivism than one began with, but still leave the reading with a multitude of valuable, ready-to-use classroom strategies. Indeed, considering the fact that all the members of a class are not going to learn exactly the same things, or have anything like the same interests or abilities, combined with the contrarian need to reach every student within a class, the social constructivist **influence** is apparent (to those familiar with it) throughout Smagorinsky's work, especially as that influence is central to the planning and implementation of the instructional unit.

Working then under that influence, whether acknowledged or not, Smagorinsky delves into the field of Language Arts writ large and explores the struggles of students and

teachers as they try to come together to make academic and relevant meanings. In some instances the constructivist lens is clear and purposeful as when Smagorinsky considers a social constructivist perspective on classroom environment, teacher practices, or the multiplicities of student composition development. At other times, the social constructivist lens must be inferred through one's own understanding of Vygotsky's theories and Smagorinsky's research practices. From beginning to end, we do see that Smagorinsky's ultimate goal is to help teachers adapt their classroom practices to create an environment that relies on "engaging students in the synthesis of previously learned knowledge and the construction of new knowledge" (p.73).

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At all times, Smagorinsky does, however, take pains to note that he is advocating for the abandonment of the transmission model of instruction that forgoes "synthesis and synergy in favor of rote memorization and mimicry" (p.18). Instead, Smagorinsky urges the reader "to consider the possibilities of teaching students in ways that challenges them to draw on a wide range of their intellectual resources to construct new knowledge and meaning" (p.18). This "meaning making" is central to a social constructivist pedagogy that values students' life experiences and knowledge gained from those experiences.

Consequently the emphasis of much of the book is on helping teachers to help students construct new knowledge and meaning in a manner that values multiplicities of understanding and demonstrating that understanding. In its defense, then, *Teaching English by Design* is an excellent model for offering that help.

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Further, by deconstructing the transmission model of teaching in which the teacher acts as purveyor of knowledge while the students role is that of receiver, Smagorinsky not only demonstrates the need for abandoning such a model, but for also adopting a social constructivist model in its place. Smagorinsky understands that acknowledging and embracing the social and cultural influences of a student's learning process is critical to understanding how to reach (and teach) that learner. It may seem to some readers that considering one's students before considering one's lesson is a matter of common sense; however Smagorinsky presents example after example to remind us that this sense is not all that common. One such incident occurred during his own public school teaching days when he observed one teacher asking another if he could borrow his test for Death of a Salesman because he "heard it was a good one" (p. 3). Nowhere in that exchange was their any acknowledgment of the very different nature of individual classrooms and the individual students within them. This

teacher simply assumed that one classroom is essentially the same as any other, and that there are universal truths inherent in each work no matter the method of presentation and examination, no matter the individual readers' responses across time and space and cultures.

Smagorinsky spends considerable effort throughout the book reminding the reader that to "teach" another there must first exist a common discourse built on the understanding that valuing the opinions and experiences of the learner is essential to the learning process. One clear example is in his Extended Definition project during which students write an extended definition of a topic, in this case discrimination, "using examples from current events, personal experiences, and literature" (p. 77). This lesson encourages students to form an opinion that takes outside influences into consideration but is ultimately built from within. If a student cannot relate to a concept they can not internalize it. Therefore, helping students discover and build the skills that allow them to truly internalize the meanings they create is a vital step in the process whereby they ultimately create authentic personal meanings from any work. However, as the author notes, teachers cannot even begin this process for discovering such skills and cognitive tools unless they first have an understanding of the manner in which their students most authentically internalize those skills. The author suggests Jerome Bruner's "scaffolding" (p.19) as one key component to this process noting that it allows the teacher and student to construct a common ground from which to engage in the learning process.

After considering the manner in which students learn and how teachers should use

that understanding to design and implement instructional units, Smagorinsky turns to the importance of designing assessments and discouraging the reader from recycling the same old tired assessments year after year. Here too Smagorinsky stresses the importance of instruments contemporarily designed to assess authentic, meaningful knowledge of a subject rather than more simplistic instruments that primarily allow some students to demonstrate their ability to parrot superficial facts about a particular topic.

Continuing the discussion in relation to instructional units designed to offer deeper understanding through more authentic experiences Smagorinsky provides a wide variety of lesson plans, some that he has created, many that he has collected over his years observing in classrooms, and still more that have been passed on by colleagues, all of which can be implemented immediately.

Recalling a test he was given at the end of a course on classical civilizations, a test focused on the history and literature of Mediterranean culture, Smagorinsky recounts being stumped by a question that asked him to identify a figure by the name of Bucephalus. Smagorinsky remembers having no recollection of this character that his teacher deemed so “significant that it should serve as a measure of [his] knowledge of classical history” (p.7) consequently he was unable to answer the question. For those of you like me who have no recall of this central character in ancient history Smagorinsky enlightens us to the fact that Bucephalus was Alexander

the Great’s horse. This amusing anecdote serves as an excellent reminder that central to the entire educational process is the consideration of what is taught versus what is assessed versus, more importantly, what is actually learned. For Smagorinsky, as for most of us one hopes, meaningful teaching includes and requires meaningful assessment, and ultimately leads to meaningful learning.

Several times Smagorinsky uses the power of analogy to drive home this point. One seemingly simple yet powerful analogy is offered when the author invokes the very familiar image of a bicycle in relation to current planning and assessment exercises witnessed within the schools. By interweaving the very personal and complex nature of learning with an analogy of knowing a bicycle, Smagorinsky is able to explicate the many ways students come to learn in a classroom and in life. We see that much like one can know a bicycle – including knowing its different parts, general purpose, personal experience riding a bicycle, an association between bicycles and important persons in one’s life, advanced skills in relation to bicycling, or any other number of manners by which one can come to know a bicycle – students also come to know all other aspects of their world, including their educational experiences. Indeed, Smagorinsky argues that while any of the variant ways listed above of knowing a bicycle are valid and true, contemporary education systems seem to focus on one’s “ability to identify its parts and their correct functions” (p. 6). He notes that it would not matter if one knew how to ride a bike or not, because most likely the student’s knowledge of the bicycle would be considered only in relation to his or her ability to properly categorize the bicycle. Demonstrating knowledge in a classroom setting is often nothing more

than an act of memory recall or rhetorical mimicry, neither of which demonstrates an authentic understanding of any topic.

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Again and again we are shown that all too often classroom teachers ignore the classroom setting they construct and merely take on the role of guide and holder of knowledge with students sitting idly by waiting for some 'truth' according to a teacher. This passive form of meaning making, or transmission model, is of the lowest levels of cognitive activity and so the results are a very surface level of understanding that carries no personal meaning to the learner and thus no real learning has occurred. Over and over we are led to see that it is not enough for a teacher to merely enter a classroom with a desire to impart knowledge to the students, no matter how good one's intentions. Because for true learning to take place, students must be engaged in the educational process, engaged with fellow learners, engaged with their own lives (p. 111). In short, students

must be able to use all of the knowledge and skills they bring with them to create new meanings as part of an authentic learning experience. In this framework, scaffolding is an essential element in considering students' lives and experiences and allowing them the freedom to express meaning and understanding in a manner that is most natural to them (p.111).

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Finally, even if one has no interest in social constructivist theories or even in adopting a social constructivist pedagogy, even if one doesn't care about Vygotsky or Bruner, but wishes nothing more than to add to his or her lesson plan stockpile, this text still serves a valuable purpose by offering teaching lessons and units that one can implement tomorrow in virtually any language arts classroom. Smagorinsky offers a "how to" clinic on unit planning with a step-by-step examination of the design process written "as though [he] is thinking aloud while planning a unit" emphasizing the integration of technology (p. 184). From the macro consideration of a unit topic, to the very local consideration of the students "culture and community" (p.131), "developmental level" (p.132), "interests" (p. 133), and "needs" (p.134), the author presents many fresh new methods for planning and implementing the traditional language arts staples of literary analysis, research papers, portfolios, and journals. What he interjects into these familiar lessons are ways in which to engage students at a deeper level such as using webquests

or multigenre papers in relation to research assignments and collaborative compositions that can produce a multitude of products involving art, music, drama, and of course writing. Still, key to every lesson, every unit plan is the initial consideration of “why am I having the students do this? What do I want them to learn”, “what is my rationale”? Smagorinsky reminds us that if we “don’t teach with conviction, the students will be the first to know” (p. 140).

I consider Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry out Instructional Units a must read for any teacher interested in improving their effectiveness in the classroom.

Ultimately, of course, this is not a guidebook for reinventing the curriculum, but is instead a rethinking and rebuilding of curriculum. Time and again the author stops to converse with the reader making sure that that reader does understand that what is most needed, in the author’s opinion, is a change in the manner in which teachers approach teaching and the assessment of that teaching. Smagorinsky asks his readers to consider **why** they choose specific lessons and assessments, to reflect on whether those choices truly serve the students’ interests. Smagorinsky offers authentic classroom examples and new slants on traditional lessons as alternative forms of approaching and assessing teaching and learning. Such alternatives always consider and build upon students’ previous knowledge and experiences encouraging teachers to improve student learning through the creation of engaging and meaningful learning experiences reliant on authentic discussion and texts rather than recycled rhetoric and meaningless tasks. This book is fully loaded

with classroom inspired and tested lessons, units, and assessments that will surely be of value to all language arts instructors no matter their experience level. I consider *Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry out Instructional Units* a must read for any teacher interested in improving their effectiveness in the classroom.

Smagorinsky, Peter. *Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry out Instructional Units*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007.

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