

Professional Links

CONNIE S. ZITLOW, EDITOR

IMAGINING NEW POSSIBILITIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH

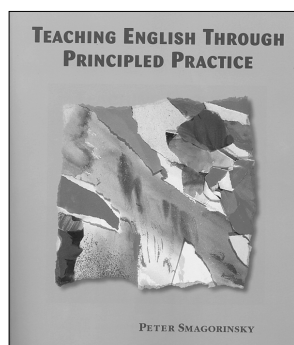
How do you stimulate your students' imaginations in your day-to-day classroom work? How can teaching be more imaginative in helping students learn? These two questions are among those included in the call for manuscripts for "The Power of Imagination." The two books chosen by guest reviewers certainly address ways to think about possible answers as we consider what we can do to make changes in our teaching practices that in turn have the possibility of helping students move beyond surface knowing to imaginative understanding.

What's Important in the Teaching of English?

Teaching English through Principled Practice

Peter Smagorinsky. Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002. 459 pp. \$38.00. ISBN 0-13-025840-7.

Reviewed by Joseph M. Flanagan
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In 1971 George Hillocks introduced *The Dynamics of English Instruction, Grades 7-12* and set the world of English teaching ablaze. At least that's what I was told by my college advisor, who, upon learning that I was interested in becoming an English teacher,

shared her copy of the book with me and encouraged me to find a copy of my own to guide my ambitions. I was subsequently exposed to Hillocks's text during my teacher preparation and have since learned that the book is used in many education pro-

grams. Long out of print, *The Dynamics of English Instruction*, surviving in the age of the photocopier, continues to influence teacher educators and their students. I have fulfilled my aspiration of becoming a teacher and am now also an English department chair. Those of us who work with young teachers, as well as all who are interested in good teaching, have a new "Hillocks," one that, from an enlightened and comprehensive point of view, addresses what is important in the teaching of English. Peter Smagorinsky's *Teaching English through Principled Practice* offers a thoughtful perspective on teaching English, as well as strategies and resources that can help any teacher become better.

Recently several members of my department and I were in the midst of a curriculum review project when I happened to see a copy of Smagorinsky's book at an NCTE convention. A brief review of the contents suggested that it would be just the type of text to help us as we continued to reflect on the "what" and "why" of our teaching and how we might make it better. This text, much more than a "how to" guide, provides a theoretical foundation for teaching English that many in our department find revolutionary. The theory is complemented by specific, practical approaches to assist teachers in developing curriculum and improving teaching strategies. In addition, Smagorinsky maintains a Web site that features the work of his University of Georgia students (<http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/VirtualLibrary/index.html>). This "Virtual Library of Conceptual Units," divided by grade level, offers samples of the types of units and rationales that Smagorinsky advocates. Utilized in tandem, the text and Web site offer substantial support to teachers seeking to develop cutting edge curricula.

The text is divided into three main sections: "Principles of Planning," "Life in Classrooms," and "Rethinking the Curriculum," with each section broken down further into smaller units that address fundamental concerns for teachers. The classroom section delves into everything from ideas for physically setting up a classroom to strategies that inspire authentic discussion. The section on "Rethinking the Curriculum" provides insight into formative movements that shape our profession such as multiculturalism, character education, and standards alignment. Many of our newer teachers have found value in what Smagorinsky says about life in classrooms, as have veterans who are eager to rethink how they go about nurturing a co-creative learning environment. Because

our group's task was concentrated on revising our curriculum, we focused our energies on the sections pertaining to planning and rethinking.

We had all read portions of the first section on planning by the time we began our curriculum project. Thus, although we varied in age, educational background, and experience, we came to the table with the beginning of what most would call common knowledge or a shared experience. Through Smagorinsky's explanations and teachers' first-person examples or "vignettes" thoughtfully presented throughout the text, we established some common principles and determined what we felt was important. Smagorinsky advocates a conceptual and constructivist approach to instruction and provides a step-by-step program about how to develop the curriculum. With an eye on his text, we achieved an understanding about what a conceptual unit is and how to create one. We learned the importance of rationales that underlie instruction (and wrote some ourselves), while also developing a common understanding of the various topics, materials, and goals that comprise sound instruction. During this process, the "Virtual Library" Web site proved eminently helpful. We were able to seek out models of the very units we were trying to create (not a bad teaching strategy itself), which gave us even more common ground upon which to build. With the text and Web site models as a starting point for our own conversations and deliberations, we determined the conceptual focal points of our sophomore curriculum. We decided to begin by having students consider the notion of *identity*, which would lead to an inquiry into maturity. Using various activities and texts, we would, by the end of the year, be in a solid position to investigate what it means to be a person of character.

Smagorinsky advocates teaching strategies that are practiced by some and underutilized by most. Our group found the section "Introductory Activities: Gateway to the Unit Concepts" particularly helpful. When we were at a point in our curriculum development where our concepts were outlined and we had written rationales for them, a document spanning twenty-six pages, we were in a good position to start creating ways to help students achieve a more tangible relationship with abstract ideas. Smagorinsky provides the theory and resources so that teachers can reach a common understanding about introductory strategies such as opinionnaires, surveys, case studies, scenarios, and writing about

personal experiences or other related problems as a means of helping students develop or activate their prior knowledge of a conceptual focal point.

Smagorinsky's text, which emphasizes the importance of sequencing as a means of building from one learning experience to the next, guided us toward curricular coherence by giving us a common understanding of the basics of curricular design. We were able to plan collectively the learning episodes where students could naturally progress to the main texts of a unit by virtue of the introductory activities. Teachers of our revised sophomore curriculum are now regularly developing their own introductory activities for other texts or collecting the latest gateway activity designed by a colleague. This collaborative habit is another benefit of working through Smagorinsky's approach—we now see curriculum development as a constantly evolving process, not just a one-time phenomenon.

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With the pages of my photocopied version of George Hillocks's book worn and tattered, I have often tried to locate an actual copy, but my search has never been successful. Now with Peter Smagorinsky's text and his "Virtual Library of Conceptual Units" I have a new resource. *Teaching English through Principled Practice* offers a sound pedagogical approach

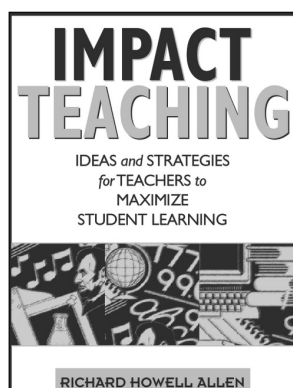
to what is important in the teaching of English, as well as the necessary support to help teachers put the theoretical vision into practice. This text will enlighten new teachers, illuminate the practice of veterans, and perhaps become a standard feature of teacher education programs everywhere.

Imaginative Ideas for Interactive Teaching

Impact Teaching: Ideas and Strategies for Teachers to Maximize Student Learning

Richard Howell Allen. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2002. 241 pp. \$32.00. ISBN 0-205-33414-8.

Reviewed by Nelda Cockman
University of North Carolina, Charlotte



Richard Allen's teaching career has included an impressive variety of instructional roles in high school, college, and corporate settings. He understands the complexities of presentation and shares lessons from his extensive and diverse experiences in this "how-to" book for

teachers. His techniques for achieving optimal learning goals in the classroom are timely as we face accountability mandates and standardized assessments that necessitate the most effective use of every classroom moment. When everything we do seems like it is not enough, Allen offers reassurances and reminds us about strategies we use or those we might have forgotten about, and he explains new techniques that he has devised or discovered in his various teaching situations.

"What is impact teaching?" is answered in chapter one, where Allen explains the underlying philosophy and psychological assumptions that frame the book. As teachers we are attracted to his goal—to give us strategies for having a "significant impact on the students, an impact that results in a measurable increase in students' knowledge or skills" (1). This impact, then, is "to affect" students in a meaningful way, "to move their feelings," and "influence their thinking" (1). Allen compares a teacher to a sailboat captain who must set the sails carefully to manage rough waters and other obstacles. Likewise, the teacher is charged with setting the sails of instruction so that students' natural energy and interests

guide the learning process efficiently toward stated goals. We sense that his intention is to help us work smarter, not harder, and we read on.

In chapter two Allen introduces five main instructional precepts for effective instruction. For example, he promotes teaching people, not content, and suggests offering viable choices to learners. He reminds us that retention is more probable when learning is enjoyable, that application of concepts is crucial to authentic learning, and that stories are great teaching tools. The power of his own teaching is evident in his explanations of generalizations and in his extensive examples from real teaching situations that clarify the suggested guidelines.

Chapter three includes explicitly pragmatic ways for teachers to create a learning environment for the best possible results and responses. Allen explains the importance of recognizing what is happening in the learning group and of being prepared to react to the energy, positive or negative, detected among the learners. He cites several factors that affect students' attention and suggests that, to sustain interest, the teacher should plan to "state changes" (33), or vary the tempo and activity. His explanations and examples enhance his premise that variety and conscious change help ensure that learners become more mentally present and comfortable. What Allen calls "open loops" (40), some educators would call setting the stage, establishing a "hook," or creating anticipation for the lesson's specific content. Allen's discussion and illustrations are convincing and reinforce what educators know, but often there is no sufficient follow-through. He also shows the value of creating frames for instructional presentation, or offering a rationale, providing context for a lesson. The frame answers the question of *why* we do something and tells why we need to know it and/or how we'll use it.

In very practical ways in chapter four, Allen details sixteen specific teaching strategies. One strategy that he calls "contrast" (68) emphasizes setting the crucial point of the lesson apart by contrasting it in some way with the rest of the lesson, thus making key concepts more memorable or easier to recall. He cautions about "too much too soon" (71) in instructional presentation and urges using appropriate steps and ongoing clarification to build upon concepts rather than overwhelming learners. This chapter includes discussions of "layering" (79) the lesson—building on a foundation of understanding, the importance of "student own-

ership” (90)—considering what choices the lesson might include, the value of music—some ways to use it and some ways not to, and “priming” (100)—making sure conditions are right for the required student response.

Allen, as teacher-author, devotes the entire fifth chapter to the art of giving effective directions, noting that it is one of the most critical issues in creating a learning environment, but something teachers are not always taught. He makes a strong case for its significance and offers specific language for giving more efficient directions for student activity. We recognize times when our directions have been weak and we wondered why “students don’t understand what I said.”

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Chapter six is an extraordinarily valuable account of the importance of nuances of language. Allen declares that “acknowledgment” (139), or what might be called affirmation or encouragement, moves the learning forward and is a vital component in the learning environment. “Appropriate orientation” (142) is a thought-provoking concept about the language we use to frame our instructional statements. The intended goal is the teacher’s understanding or sensitivity to the audience and deliberate

devising of the most appropriate orientation. The discussion of “open or closed questions” (159) is an extension of the teacher’s language use. The format of a closed question implies that there is a single correct response. An open presentation of the same question puts accountability on the student and signifies that there is more than one possible answer. Such a format increases the chance of student engagement and participation.

The seventh and final chapter contains strategies for designing interactive lessons. Allen offers a model illustrating five possible steps in instructional presentation and suggests several alternatives to the framework. “Teaching backward” (198) involves using tests or exams to set the direction and specific goals of the course. English language arts teachers might think of ways to utilize teacher tests or samples from standardized assessment to diagnose and set learning goals.

The format of the book is particularly user-friendly in that each chapter begins with an overview of the specifics, presents a definition and explanation of the concept, additional clarification, extended examples of each, and then a summary of the suggestion. The six appendices include an abbreviated menu of the entire book with an annotation of each strategy or concept for easy reference and a collection of stories to support their use in teaching. One appendix offers a basic sequence for creating any instructional presentation or making effective speeches, while another provides guidelines for creating an in-service program.

Impact Teaching is for seasoned as well as novice teachers. A particularly effective use of the book would be for a discussion group of mentors and new teachers to share its vision and generate authentic applications in their own environment. Allen is particularly generous and responsive to the reader’s individual personality and teaching style. As he invites us to make personal and creative applications of the techniques he has cataloged, we are called to use our imagination in making our classrooms optimal learning environments.