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# PETER SMAGORINSKY

Second Edition

# TEACHING ENGLISH BY DESIGN

How to Create and Carry Out  
Instructional Units

Foreword by **Leila Christenbury**

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Portsmouth, NH

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Darren Rhym is a high school English teacher in Greensboro, Georgia, and an adjunct instructor at the University of Georgia. He holds a Ph.D. in language and literacy education from the University of Georgia and has taught in several high schools along with Morehouse College and the University of North Georgia. Originally from Trenton, New Jersey, Darren earned degrees at Bucknell and Penn State before completing his doctorate under the advisement of Peter Smagorinsky.

# FOREWORD

LEILA CHRISTENBURY

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*Will this unit solve all the world's problems? Hardly. But it will tie the curriculum to students' interests, give them tools to challenge inequity, and provide them with possible avenues for social action that they may not have seen as possible for them. From what we can tell, that's a lot more than they are getting out of school as presently conducted, and that's reason enough to give it a try.*

—Chapter 15, *Teaching English by Design*

The vision of what a well-crafted unit can accomplish is a vision that is no less than the instructional gold standard. Like my friend and colleague Peter Smagorinsky, I believe that such units may well provide “a lot more than [what students] are getting out of school as presently conducted,” a conclusion that is largely confirmed by my own recent observations of almost 120 English classrooms. Over three semesters of visits to both public middle and high schools, I saw English teachers who, when allowed to move away from the pacing guide and the scripted curriculum, could create and enact exciting, inventive, and authentic instruction that motivated students and inspired learning. When teachers were not so empowered, I saw little intellectual excitement, little creative thinking, and a whole lot of apathetic student—and teacher—compliance.

This is not where we want our twenty-first-century classrooms to be, and this second edition of *Teaching English by Design* shows the way to invigorating instruction and using, rather than stifling, the knowledge and creativity of our teachers.

When over a decade ago I had the good fortune to write the foreword to the first edition of this book, I concentrated on the role of the teacher and how *Teaching English by Design* made such a compelling case for unleashing the expertise of classroom instructors. At the time, the primacy of the classroom teacher, a factor that is most often ignored in educational research and in subsequent policy decisions, was on a national roll of sorts. Great teachers were being lauded and highlighted as the *most important factor* in student learning. What welcome news and how overdue! This recognition of the role of teachers thus seemed like an advance in our thinking, but as I noted in my foreword, it was quickly twisted to buttress the false assertion that an accomplished teacher could personally overcome any and all barriers to

student learning. These barriers included, but were not limited to, student and family poverty and its concomitant stresses, inadequate student nutrition, community instability, insufficient school funding, and outdated or nonexistent classroom supplies.

But not to worry: The message of the times was that a great teacher remains undaunted and conquers such limitations. Let those teachers create fine instruction, and all will be well.

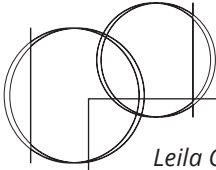
Obviously, all did not turn out well.

This unrealistic assessment of the influence of great instructors and of the power of their skills meant that most of the burden of student learning rested on individual teachers' shoulders, and therefore if there were blame to be apportioned regarding the extent and persistence of student learning and achievement (and in American education, isn't there always blame to be apportioned?), the fault lay with the teachers. Surely this rhetorical move absolved communities and their governments from repairing decrepit schools, ordering new laptops, and even assessing the safety and health of neighborhoods and factoring in their effect on student achievement. All of these societal ills were tangential: The teacher was all.

Now we are in a different political climate, and the heroic, all-conquering teacher is no longer the omnipresent meme.

But the message—and the centrality—of *Teaching English by Design* remains. Updated and highly contextual, this second edition adds to our understanding of targeted instructional expertise and how it enhances student learning and provides classroom work that is truly crafted “with students in mind.” As so clearly articulated in the excerpt from Chapter 15 at the beginning of this foreword, teacher-created conceptual units—not scripted instruction or mandated curricula—can give students tools and avenues, approaches to issues of importance. No, the teacher is not the sole factor in student learning, but the teacher creation of instruction that is student-centered and student-oriented is a crucial component to student success and student achievement.

As I noted some years ago and is still true today, *Teaching English by Design* is a book with big ideas and bigger ambitions. This second edition once again honors the intelligence of students and the creativity and professionalism of teachers. The latter cannot conquer all, but given the freedom to enact rigorous instruction and innovative curricula, our students' learning—and their true intellectual engagement—is greatly enhanced.



*Leila Christenbury is Commonwealth Professor Emerita at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. She is a coeditor of Handbook on Adolescent Literacy Research with Peter Smagorinsky and Randy Bomer, and a winner of the National Reading Conference Edward B. Fry Book Award.*



**5 minutes:** (attendance, other business) *Warm-up:* In a journal, write in response to the following prompt: How can a poet or performer change society for the better?

**15 minutes:** *Minilesson:* Allowing for time to set up the technology, show “Langston Hughes & the Harlem Renaissance: Crash Course Literature 215” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ir0URpI9nKQ&t=25s>.

**15 minutes:** *Work session:* Ask: Do you see any connections between the issues discussed in response to the opinionnaire and the role of the Harlem Renaissance in fighting bigotry for earlier generations of African Americans? If students see none, prompt for such connections as:

- Compare and contrast racial prejudice of today with racial prejudice of Langston Hughes’s time.
- In what ways are poetry and arts good ways to fight bigotry today? How did they help fight bigotry back then?
- Who are today’s artists fighting back against racism?
- What are their messages and methods?
- Do these artists produce any changes, or do things always remain the same? Or do they make things worse?
- What might young people do to fight back against prejudice, either against themselves or other social groups?
- What risks do artists take when protesting injustice?

**5 minutes:** Introduce Billie Holiday’s version of “Strange Fruit” by saying that it was a song of protest; play the song. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs> for a performance, and <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/billieholiday/strangefruit.html> for lyrics. Distribute or display the lyrics for students to consult as they watch the performance.

Optionally, play versions by Jill Scott (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkXAxpzE6Gk>) or Nina Simone ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8Lq\\_yasEgo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8Lq_yasEgo), which includes graphic images of lynchings), or other artists.

**10 minutes:** *Discussion:* How does this song protest social injustice? How did the song make you feel? What did the song make you want to do? Is violence an appropriate response to violence? Is singing an appropriate response to violence? Do law enforcement and the court system provide better ways of fighting prejudice than art? How, and how not?

**10 minutes:** *Closure, aka "ticket out the door":* Depending on the length of the discussion, either have the discussion conclude the class, or again have students write their impressions, feelings, thoughts, or other responses to the unit thus far. Perhaps use the following prompt:

Explain the main idea of the discussion using an analogy, such as, "Fighting injustice with music is like \_\_\_\_\_."

If time allows, have students volunteer their analogies and use their ideas to generate further discussion, either on this day or the next.

### Day 3 (Wednesday)

The first two days have introduced to students the idea that societal inequity exists, has existed for many years, and has been protested by artists for generations. Now the class may begin to learn procedures for undergoing the process of critical inquiry through the deconstruction of texts, reconstruction of possibilities, and undertaking of social action.

<i>Essential question</i>	How does one conduct a critical analysis that includes the processes of deconstruction, reconstruction, and positive change?
<i>Assessment</i>	Formative assessment of students' understanding of the processes of deconstruction, reconstruction, and positive change
<i>Daily life skills instruction</i>	Learning critical skills to critique inequity
<i>Standards covered</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze how the same story may be told in different sorts of texts of varying modes (e.g., writing, graphic images) and which features are best expressed through which symbol systems.</li> <li>Determine how an author argues points and assess the validity of the reasoning and evidentiary quality of the examples.</li> <li>Analyze historical documents for content and persuasive style.</li> </ul>

Record keeping, 10R17-19

**5 minutes:** (attendance, other business) *Warm-up:* Explain in a letter to a friend what you think is most in need of change in society.

**10 minutes:** *Minilesson on Deconstruction:* Distribute Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem." Lead students through the process of how to read the poem's answer to the question, posed in the poem's first line in which the speaker asks about the consequence of deferring a dream. The first interrogative in response to this question appears in the second and third lines of the poem, which were later taken up by Lorraine Hansberry for the title to her black family drama *A Raisin in the Sun*. Students may or may not be familiar with interpreting analogies, so it would be useful to pair the two items for comparison, using whatever means of presentation or projection is available (whiteboard, projector, etc.).

[Poem's initial question]	[First analogy in poem's second and third lines]
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How are the two similar? How are they different? Why would Hughes make an analogy between the opening abstraction and the simile in lines 2–3? The teacher could lead an investigation into this question, using the space beneath each item to record students' suggestions. Depending on how the students manage this task, the next stage of this scaffold could have the teacher either continue leading a discussion of the next analogy or begin to turn over the task to students working in pairs. The next analogy for a dream deferred appears in lines 4–5 and compares a deferred dream to an open wound. If students work in pairs, have them offer their interpretations after several minutes of discussion.

**20 minutes:** *Work session:* The next analogy appears in line 6 and compares deferred dreams to decaying, stench-emitting flesh. Students could undertake the analysis in pairs, assuming that this scaffolding process is effective in helping students work with Hughes's series of analogies. The class could work in this fashion over the remaining analogies.

Lines 7–8 provide an image of deceptive sweetness.

Lines 9–10 suggest a burden.

One possibility would be to have students write individually on the last, explosive analogy of the poem in line 11. This writing could then serve as the basis for a discussion of the whole poem in a whole-class setting.

**15 minutes:** *Minilesson on Reconstruction:* In response to the inequities revealed by Hughes, what vision is available to change society for the better? Have students work in pairs to come up with alternatives that help to address these societal challenges, saving a whole-class exploration for the next day.

**10 minutes:** *Closure, aka "ticket out the door":* Depending on the length of the discussion, either have the discussion conclude the class or again have students write their impressions, feelings, thoughts, or other responses to the unit thus far. Perhaps use the following prompt:

Explain the main idea using an analogy, such as, "Fighting injustice with poetry is like \_\_\_\_\_."

If time allows, have students volunteer their responses and discuss them.

## Day 4 (Thursday)

This class extends the previous day's discussion, with students given agency in deconstructing texts, reconstructing possibilities, and identifying means of social action in relation to "Harlem."

<i>Essential question</i>	How can critique become social action?
<i>Assessment</i>	Informal formative assessment of students' ability to make sense of a text that engages in social critique and to make inferences about social change
<i>Daily life skills instruction</i>	Generating ideas for constructive social action
<i>Standards covered</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the main theme of a text and how it is developed, and summarize the text's contents.</li> </ul>

Record keeping, 10RL1-2

**10 minutes:** (attendance, other business) *Warm-up:* Compare and contrast Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" to a modern song or poem that critiques society's inequities. For follow-up, ask students to volunteer their contemporary examples and why they chose them.

**40 minutes:** *Minilesson on Reconstruction and Social Action and Work session:* Have groups share their ideas from the previous day's reconstruction of Hughes's social critique. What problems is he addressing, and how can students use their imaginations and knowledge to address them? What solutions do they see available to themselves as youths to make society more equitable and to reduce the effects of racism? The teacher's role in this segment will be to act as a recorder of the students' ideas, using the best available medium for making their views public.

**10 minutes:** *Closure, aka "ticket out the door":* Have the students write in response to one of the following question stems, discussing them as time allows:

"I believe \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_."

"I am confused by \_\_\_\_\_."

### Day 5 (Friday)

The next class provides an opportunity to link Hughes's poetry to contemporary music and poetry. Hughes himself was once a pop culture artist whose work was of such quality that it became part of the national culture. Every generation produces enduring artists and a preponderance of passing fads. What qualities make a contemporary artist stand up over time? The students begin to explore that question with today's activities.

<i>Essential question</i>	What are the consequences of an artist's social critique?
<i>Assessment</i>	Informal assessment of students' learning through their discussions and conclusions
<i>Daily life skills instruction</i>	Understanding popular culture through critical thinking
<i>Standards covered</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze word usage in terms of rhetorical impact and figurative effects, both at the local and global textual levels.</li> <li>• Analyze a text's structure, order, and pacing and how they potentially produce specific effects on a reader.</li> <li>• Identify the perspective taken by the author of a verbal text.</li> <li>• Interpret figures of speech and analyze their role in a text.</li> </ul>

Record keeping, 10RL4-6 and 10L5

**10 minutes:** (attendance, other business) *Warm-up:* In a journal write in response to the following prompt: “‘Popular culture’ refers to what is currently happening in a society, often in terms of entertainment. As time moves ahead and new things come along, some works of popular culture remain part of historical culture, whereas others are forgotten. Which works of popular culture from today do you think will become part of historical culture over time? Why will they endure when others are forgotten?”

**15 minutes:** *Minilesson:* This writing could then become the basis for a class discussion. Ask students to suggest works from current pop culture that they believe will become part of historical culture, perhaps using a projector or whiteboard to record their responses as follows:

Popular culture song, video, performance, etc.	Reasons it will last when other works fade away

Pop culture chart

**15 minutes:** *Work session:* In small groups, have students identify the traits that enable a work of popular culture to become, like Hughes’s “Harlem” and the song “Strange Fruit,” part of historical culture.

**15 minutes:** *Follow-up:* Whole-class discussion in which students share their emerging definitions of “enduring work of popular culture.”

**5 minutes:** *Closure, aka “ticket out the door”:* Compare and contrast: Briefly, write about a work from current pop culture that will outlast its current popularity with one that you believe will not. What is the difference between them?

## WEEK 2

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### Day 6 (Monday)

This session will focus on two rap performances from the 1990s, one of which has become canonical, the other of which has not. Using music that the students may be familiar with through older family members, this day's activities will extend the students' inquiry into what products of popular culture have the potential to help change society.

<i>Essential question</i>	What works of popular culture become part of historical culture, and why?
<i>Assessment</i>	Informal formative assessment of students' writing skills via their discussions
<i>Daily life skills instruction</i>	Judging the quality of popular culture songs
<i>Standards covered</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Determine the figurative, connotative, and technical meanings of words and phrases as they are used in different sorts of texts written in specific communities of practice.</li><li>• Analyze the quality of an author's claims and supporting evidence.</li><li>• Determine an author's point of view, and analyze how the author advances it.</li></ul>

Record keeping, 10R14–16

**10 minutes:** (attendance, other business) *Warm-up:* In a journal, write in response to the following prompt: "Think of popular music from previous generations that you believe still has value, either political, musical, or through other features. Why has this music remained relevant long after its own time?"

**10 minutes:** *Minilesson:* Follow up the journal writing with a discussion on which works of pop culture survive their own time and are relevant to later generations. Referring back to the previous day's discussion, see if the students would change anything about the definition of "enduring work of popular culture."

**10 minutes:** *Work session:* Play a sanitized version of a rap song from the 1990s that has had enduring value, and one that has long been forgotten. These songs might include the following:

Enduring: Public Enemy, “Fight the Power” (radio edit at <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Public-Enemy/Fight-the-Power-radio-edit>)

Forgotten: A selection from any of the “worst hip-hop songs of the ‘90s” websites such as <http://www.mademan.com/mm/10-worst-rap-songs-90s.html>. For purposes of illustration, we will use “Take Me There” by Mya featuring Blackstreet, Mase, and Blinky Blink (radio edit at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_TyOOPewpo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_TyOOPewpo)).

**10 minutes:** Have students work in small groups to discuss these two songs. Which do they think has endured? Which is in history’s dustbin? Why would one survive as significant, but not the other (even as it might survive as camp or curiosity because the Internet archives everything)?

**15 minutes:** Ask each group to explain their decision and to provide reasons for their conclusion.

**5 minutes:** *Closure, aka “ticket out the door”:* “The Minute Paper”—Have the students write briefly on the most meaningful thing they’ve learned so far during this unit.

## Day 7 (Tuesday)

Day 7 will continue to look at canonical and contemporary, socially oriented poems and music, using more feminist work from both the Harlem Renaissance and contemporary hip-hop. Both of these periods have produced both male and female artists, yet males have gotten most of the attention. This class specifically looks at the concerns of women writing about inequities they experience in society.

<i>Essential question</i>	What do authors of Harlem Renaissance texts and current hip-hop artists deconstruct in society?
<i>Assessment</i>	Informal formative assessment of students’ writing skills via their journal entries
<i>Daily life skills instruction</i>	Understanding historical discrimination and its relation to the present



<i>Standards covered</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Analyze different accounts of the same subject told in different mediums, and determine which details are emphasized in each account.</li><li>• Construct arguments that include valid claims, evidence, and interpretations, and present them such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization and determine their appropriateness to the rhetorical situation.</li><li>• Analyze historical documents for content and persuasive style.</li></ul>
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Record keeping, 10R17-19

**5 minutes:** (attendance, other business) *Warm-up:* Have the students write a Twitter post in less than 140 characters that sums up their view of what they have discussed so far.

**20 minutes:** *Minilesson:* Using both a classic poetic work from the Harlem Renaissance and a contemporary work from the hip-hop genre, engage in a process of deconstruction, reconstruction, and social action. These two texts might include the following:

Harlem Renaissance: Georgia Douglas Johnson: “The Heart of a Woman” (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/52494>)

Hip-Hop Genre: Eve: “Who’s That Girl?” (radio edit at <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whos-That-Girl-Main-Radio/dp/B002WQVOBO>)

Begin with the relatively short Johnson’s “The Heart of a Woman.” Lead the class through the following process:

Deconstruction: What is the artist criticizing about society?
Reconstruction: What would the artist imagine to be a better society?
Social Action: What does the artist either state or suggest would change society for the better?

“Heart of a Woman” discussion