

## Conceptual Conundrums in Learning to Teach English Language Arts

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Book review of Smagorinsky, P. (2020). [\*Learning to teach English and the language arts: A Vygotskian perspective on beginning teachers' pedagogical concept development\*](#). Bloomsbury.

*Learning to Teach English and the Language Arts* is as much a testament to Peter Smagorinsky's extensive career as a distinguished research professor in English education as it is a handbook for educational stakeholders navigating the theory-to-practice divide—and indeed, it serves both purposes rather well. The introduction, for instance, speaks directly to the chasm between the *language* that educator-researchers use theoretically and the creative, affective, and mediated *application* in the classroom. Smagorinsky grounds his analyses and discussion in Vygotsky's perspectives on learning to illustrate how learning to teach is complicated by each new teacher's social context.

The conundrums Smagorinsky puts forth feel deeply familiar, and his writing embodies the clarity of explication that the book, as a whole, promotes. Taken collectively, the book's 12 chapters argue for teacher education programs (TEPs) to develop a *conceptual home base*. If the field is going to recruit, prepare, and retain the excellent teachers that our nation's diverse student populations deserve, TEPs need to explicitly reinforce, through practice, the theoretical principles they champion. This endeavor is infinitely more complex than it may sound.

To illustrate his argument, Smagorinsky presents multiple case studies across nine chapters, selectively aggregating each study by experience and focus. Student-participants come from three different TEPs and are followed through their student teaching and into their first years in the classroom. Data from interviews and classroom observations describe how each teacher's pedagogical growth is shifted by competing and often irreconcilable power dynamics, curriculum and policy initiatives, and cultural ideologies. Smagorinsky threads these discussions alongside familiar teacher education theories, such as Lortie's (1975) apprenticeship of observation and Feiman-Nemser and Buchman's (1985) two-worlds pitfall. Readers will recognize the inevitably systemic, institutional, ideological collisions new teachers experience across schooling contexts when learning to teach English language arts. But, without cultivating a conceptual home base, Smagorinsky argues, the contradictory environments often end up (re)shaping teacher practice (and, over time, ideology) in ways that reify the very binaries current research and theory intend to resist.

For instance, Chapter 5 speaks to schooling's historical, systemic investment in whiteness and how epistemological differences are often evaded through “flowery rhetoric” (p. 97) and diversity hires. Cultural mismatches in field experiences, accountability mandates, and fragmented curriculum further complicate programmatic assumptions in learning to teach in antiracist and equitable ways. Chapter 10 explores this tension through grammar pedagogy, revealed as a “glaring hole in English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers' university education” and a persistent “staple” in language strands of schooling curricula (pp. 174–176). Readers follow two beginning teachers as they navigate the *if* and *how* of teaching grammar and find a “twisting path of concept development in relation to the mediation of different settings” (p. 187). The pedagogical complexity revealed in each case veritably troubles (and prunes) the field's notion

of “best practices” writ large, unsettling critiques of grammar instruction that often appear concluded, exhausted, and elitist. In his closing remarks, Smagorinsky explains how neoliberal patterns of efficiency and Anglo-normative standards in schools do not jibe with constructivist ideals. Rather, TEPs need to cultivate educators’ discernment and dexterity to face the complex realities of constructivism head on.

Readers who seek answers to the age-old theory-practice divide will instead find “gritty details” (p. 95) illuminating, collectively, the competing forces that keep many educators from developing the deeply rigorous and resonant craft required for excellent teaching. Offering a conceptual home base that sustains a teacher across contextual domains *is* a heady goal, but our nation’s children deserve racially and culturally diverse ELA teachers who engage, resist, and thrive over the long haul. Sharing cases with preservice teachers could indeed help them name and navigate the (often contradictory) variables shaping their own experiences, and this book provides teacher educators and beginning teachers alike with a spectrum of entry points.

#### References

- Feiman-Nemser, S., & Buchman, M. (1985). Pitfalls of experience in teacher preparation. *Teachers College Record*, 87(1), 53–65.
- Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. University of Chicago Press.

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