Backward-designing a graduate phonology seminar

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Introduction

The scholarship of teaching in phonology has, with good reason, largely focused on introductory and midlevel undergraduate courses. However, phonology is also taught in courses for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. This paper explores the use of scholarly teaching techniques, in particular Backward Design, as applied in the context of a small graduate-level seminar.

This course, listed as a phonology seminar on the phonetics-phonology interface, was taught in the linguistics department of a U.S. university in the spring semester of 2021, using a remote format due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Four students participated: three pre-candidacy doctoral students and one final-semester undergraduate in a dual-degree B.A./M.A. program.

Planning for this course was conducted in the framework of Backward Design (Wiggins & McTighe 2005). Accordingly, the first step was to identify learning goals/outcomes, then identify appropriate evidence (i.e. assessments) of attaining those goals, and only then to plan course activities.

Design

Learning goals are unique in that they involve progressive development of existing skills and that they are by nature highly dependent on the particular needs and interests of the students. The development of existing skills is taking place in the students' transition from being "consumers" to "producers" of research. Centering the students' own interests brought two benefits. First, it maximized the benefit to the students' progress in graduate school. Second, connecting behavior to identity is associated with greater self-regulation (Berkman et al. 2017), a frequent issue for graduate students. The goals were kept broad, but were prominently placed on the first page of the syllabus:

- **Read** research articles intelligently
- **Discuss** research ideas with others orally and in writing
- **Conduct** research of their own by reviewing literature, formulating a question and hypothesis, testing the hypothesis, and interpreting the results.

Assessments and activities were developed based on these goals, with opportunities for extensive feedback from the instructor. Reading and discussion were assessed together, in written reflections on the weekly readings and by rotating responsibility for leading class discussion. The final paper standard to seminars in the department was maintained, but divided into a series of interim deadlines. The paper assessed discussing and conducing research, but the progressive deadlines focused attention on particular sections in a way that mirrored how articles are read. Grading for reading responses, discussion leads, and interim deadlines was on a five-point scale with written feedback from the instructor, while the final paper had a longer grading rubric with written comments.

Implementation

The nature of these assessments and activities required synchronous interaction, so course meetings were held on videoconference. Written reflects on the weekly readings were posted to a discussion forum, which other students read and occasionally developed into dialogues. Readings were deliberately left unplanned at the start of the course, with topics and readings collectively decided by the class. Each meeting, a 110-minute block with a short break in the middle, one of the students or the instructor prepared a handout and led discussion. Direct instruction was limited to modeling specific skills, such as walking through the process of reading a paper, leading the first classes' discussions, and providing suggested approaches to writing each interim assignment.

Results

Student engagement remained high throughout the course, with very consistent submission of assignments and active participation in class discussion. Students reported that the seminar was unusually "relevant" and they frequently encountered the readings in other contexts. Students also reported feeling unusually confident in their final papers thanks to the progressive deadlines, regular feedback, and ability to tailor the project and syllabus together. From the instructor's perspective, the final papers were of high quality and meaningfully engaged with readings and topics from the course to an unusual degree. Three of the four students wrote papers that further developed aspects of qualifying papers or their thesis, while the fourth explored a potential area for future research.That the papers were deeply rooted in the course and contributing to the students' research programs was taken as a sign that this seminar succeeded in helping them meet their goals.

Students eagerly discussed proposed topics for readings, but were hesitant to propose concrete decisions in class. As such, I largely decided the topics of the readings for the first half of the course, selecting several major paradigms potentially relevant to the students' interests. For the second half of the course, topics largely rotated through the individual students' research topics, and more directly informed discussions of final papers in progress. In the future, I would instead gradually open the space of choices: pre-determined readings at the beginning of the course, several sets of readings collectively downselected from a longer list in the middle, and then student-selected sources potentially cited in their final papers.

Conclusion

Backward Design provided a useful template for planning the seminar. While the format of the course generally resembled that of similar courses in the department, the approach guided a number of important details that contributed to the success of the course as judged by feedback from students and the nature of their final papers. The application of scholarly teaching principles to a graduate seminar demonstrates their value for all levels of linguistics education.

References

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