Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 16 *Fall 2015*

Article 6

October 2015

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Recommended Citation

Doyle, Anne E. "Creating a Learning Environment with Shared Responsibility for Assessment," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 16 (2015), https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss16/6

CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT WITH SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR ASSESSMENT

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> As I approach my Introduction to Linguistics classroom about ten minutes before the class is due to start, I find the lights already on, the door between the library and the classroom firmly closed, and one of my students, armed with a whiteboard marker, drawing a phrase structure tree while speaking over her shoulder to the rest of the students in the class, who are seated in front of her. When I enter, the student at the front pauses, wondering if she should stop, and I smile, ask her to continue, and take a seat at the rear of the room while my student handles questions from her classmates about how to create the phrase structure trees to demonstrate the structural ambiguity. To my delight, at this point in the semester—a week after the mid-semester exam—20 of the 25 students in the class have arrived early to study together for the day's quiz, and as individuals in the room prepped together for the quiz, the session has evolved into this impromptu lesson on the board.
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> At the end of the same semester, as I am helping my class review materials for the final exam, one of the students notes that the definition section of the exam could easily be accommodated by a crossword puzzle. The class explodes with reactions: two-thirds of the group love the idea, while one-third finds the idea of a crossword puzzle intimidating. The students and I agree to incorporate a crossword puzzle as an extra-credit component of the exam, noting that any attempt to do the crossword will not harm a student's grade, but may strengthen it.

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With over 35 years in the classroom as a college professor, when I step back and look at moments like these over the years, I can still be surprised by the cumulative effects of small changes in my courses. Over time, I have been moving all my courses toward a more collaborative model, with my students taking greater responsibility for what happens in the classroom; as a teacher of writing, collaborative and peer review activities are part of my pedagogical toolbox. The difficulty for me has been in non-writing intensive courses where at the beginning of the course, the students know very little about the subject. This is especially the case with Introduction to Linguistics, an upper-level course required on our campus for the juniors and seniors of two different majors: the English majors who intend to teach in secondary schools and the Communication Disorders majors.

My overarching goal in this course is to help my students both to understand the elements of language and linguistic development which their other courses will make use of and how and to discover why linguists develop specific linguistic theories and reach specific conclusions. Over the semesters, I have discovered that my goals are best served when I maximize the possibilities in my classes for partnership between my students and me.

Reaching Goals While Adrift in Uncertainty

But the challenges in teaching this course collaboratively or in partnership with the students are many: the two groups of students, although advanced in their majors, do not know very much about the areas of linguistics we will examine, so I must rely on their knowledge as language users as a starting point for the course. Additionally, the students do not know each other across disciplinary boundaries. (Sometimes even the majors in a single department may not be very familiar with each other.) Finally, the course requires both groups of majors to step outside of the familiar frames of analysis they have learned in their majors and to approach the study of language as a linguist—a language scientist—does.

Bluntly, in Introduction to Linguistics I am asking students to venture into previously-unexplored territory, to risk taking a position of some authority in a field brand new to them, and to do so with fellow students they may not know at all, in a course required for their specific major. All this leaves the students in the class feeling alone and awash in uncertainty. As Bryn Mawr student Sarah Jenness noted (2013), becoming comfortable with uncertainty in the service of learning is a threshold concept, one which many of my students have not yet crossed. While Vygotsky is correct that some discomfort must accompany the acquisition of new knowledge, he also notes that too much discomfort can disrupt learning (1978). Many years of teaching Introduction to Linguistics to undergraduates at Bridgewater State University has taught me that to help my students become comfortable with the uncertainty inherent in learning and to achieve my course goals, I must scaffold my students in their uncertainty by helping them connect in partnership with each other and with me.

Most of my students learn best when they can manipulate the concepts they are learning, "get their hands dirty" with the materials, and work in groups to analyze some data and reach a conclusion. In the undergraduate and graduate classes where I am a writing instructor, I have long been influenced by the work of Kenneth Bruffee ("Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'"), who argues that collaborative learning mirrors the process which Thomas Kuhn identifies in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) as the making of knowledge in a field: "we establish knowledge or justify belief collaboratively by challenging each other's biases and presuppositions; by negotiating collectively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression; and by joining larger, more experienced communities of knowledgeable peers through assenting to those communities' interests, values, language, and paradigms of perception and thought" (p. 646). I understand learning as taking place through the medium of language and conversation.

But for students, conversation in classrooms can be risky. When they know little about the subject, when they feel alienated from their fellow students and the instructor, students are too anxious to risk speaking, too anxious to risk making a mistake, too afraid of the uncertainty of their knowing.

For many years I have struggled to create in my linguistics class that sense of trust and group commitment to a goal which is necessary for true collaborative learning. I have urged students to seek me out during my office hours should they be confused in an assignment, but few made the trek to my office. I have provided homework and in-class opportunities for my students to

manipulate, by themselves or in small groups, the concepts we were learning, but that did not result in a collaborative atmosphere.

To promote a sense of collaboration in the classroom, I added a project where students would work in groups to create an oral group presentation on a topic in the course's secondary readings, but my students complained that group members were not all pulling their weight, and these group activities seemed contrived. I groped for a way to invite students' partnership in the assessment of their work, to involve them all more fully in the process of making and sharing knowledge. About six years ago, I decided to clarify our expectations for the group assignments in part by engaging each semester's class in the development of an Oral Report Response Sheet, in which the students would lay out their minimal expectations for what a successful group oral presentation should involve; the class would use this group-designed sheet to evaluate each group, and I too would use the same sheet in my own evaluation.

Although the group presentations grew more polished, the groups still suffered from members who would not fully participate. Further, the students were reluctant to evaluate each other's groups in their Response Sheets; the scores they gave each other were uniformly high, and the comments vague and unhelpful. Clearly, my students were not taking responsibility for the class with each other or with me. My breakthrough in my linguistics class came only when, for myself and the students, I began to reframe the entire class (not just a specific assignment or classroom activity) as a collaborative project in which we would all participate and no one would be left behind.

Gradually Adapting to Reach Shared Goals

Our class works on a basis of mutual respect and shared goals. Everyone in my linguistics class now understands that success will involve working together, as partners, to accomplish our goals. One of the ways I have demonstrated my own commitment to our shared goals is by changing my approach to assessment in the classroom. In this class, assessment is a formative device which provides timely input in the course design, and I am now explicit in involving the students in ways that help them see our assessment activities as formative.

This approach was the result of a series of gradual changes for me. First, over the course of a couple of years I expanded students' opportunities in this class to ask questions about and even to propose questions for my exam prep sheets. Rather than see class time exam prep simply as an opportunity to help students discover what they did not yet know, I began to invite discussion about the focus and purposes of the questions, and the students began to offer metalinguistic commentary about the exam questions which helped me reteach where necessary and helped us all rethink the purposes of my questions. For example, after a student pointed out in one prep session that an essay question about the components of the articulatory system would result in a "boring list," I stopped giving essay questions which simply asked for a retelling of the material of the text. As my students pointed out, essays which allow an exploration of a concept are much more interesting that essays which simply define that concept.

Later, when I began seeing the fruits of our partnership on exam creation, I rethought the relationship of our weekly quizzes to my students' learning. Again, over a couple of years I

began evolving, with the help of my students, a quiz structure where each quiz at some point recalls an element from the last quiz, weaving the content of the course together more effectively. I decided as well to be more forthcoming in explaining the choices I make about the course's structure.

Today, in our linguistics class, our explicit, mutually-agreed goal is the understanding of the content of the course. We now develop a partnership to achieve our goal, with both my students and me taking responsibility. At the very beginning of the semester, I undertake certain promises to the students: no pop quizzes, opportunities to ask questions for 15 minutes before a quiz, clear explanations of what the mid-semester, final and oral presentations will require, extra credit opportunities in lieu of curving the grades on a test, and students having input in exam design and being able to offer suggestions on the use of a quiz grade.

I still provide homework and in-class opportunities for my students to manipulate, by themselves or in small groups, the concepts we are learning, but that alone does not suffice to create a collaborative atmosphere. We now treat the quizzes themselves as learning opportunities: the weekly quizzes serve as opportunities to demonstrate mastery of the week's concepts and to better understand concepts from the previous week, so my students have more than one "bite at the apple" to demonstrate concept mastery. Students have an opportunity in every quiz, after the very first one, to work out an additional "extra credit" section of the quiz. This extra credit section always addresses a concept that some of the class members have struggled with on the previous week's quiz.

By the mid-semester, it is not unusual for a student to earn a score above 100% in the quizzes. Because the knowledge in this course is cumulative, with later concepts dependent on the understanding of earlier ones, this approach, which interweaves current and past topics week to week, has strengthened the performance of all my students.

Between the mid-semester and the final exam, as the materials become more complex, I find that the students need more time to master them. So the nature of our weekly quizzes changes a bit. After mid-semester, if the students seem uncertain before the quiz, I will ask them to take it "just to try," or "for fun." The understanding within the classroom is that this particular quiz will not count; that the following week's quiz will contain questions from this week's work as well as next week's; and that this quiz, on this day, is purely a practice opportunity.

With this understanding, my students' anxiety ratchets downward, and my students have further evidence that our assessment tools are not meant to catch them out, but to help them grow in knowledge in the field. It has happened that, even though they professed uncertainty, the class has done generally well on a practice quiz; if this is the case, students may ask me to consider their grade for this quiz when I compute the final course grade. Thus, better-prepared students do not feel ill-used when a portion of the class needs additional time to master the materials.

I do not use a publisher's question bank or reuse quizzes from year to year, so my students know that each quiz is designed for their own particular class. It takes time to prepare and grade weekly quizzes, but with them, I always have a good sense of where my students are in their progress through the course, and so do they.

There are also extra credit sections in my mid-semester and final examinations. Additionally, for both exams I provide my students at least week in advance with an exam prep sheet detailing what concepts they should know and what specific analytical linguistic operations they may be asked to perform in the exam. I have been asked by a colleague whether the presence of extra credit exam materials inflate my students' grades; the answer is "not really." My students still need to learn the material; we have simply changed summative assessment to normative assessment, which aids them in learning.

Because they know that their exam grade will not suffer from an incorrect answer in the "extra credit" section of an exam, all of my students are more willing to take a risk in trying to answer the question; they know a partially-correct response will earn partial extra credit, that it will benefit them to try to operationalize what they know about the linguistic concept involved.

Formerly, in my linguistics exams the least prepared students would leave very early; having felt overwhelmed by the exam, they gave up. The more able and quicker students might finish in 75-80 minutes, and those who thought carefully but more slowly would be there till the bitter end.

Now even my less prepared students stay to try harder while the students who know the material well stay to take full take advantage of the extra-credit work. Most students work on the exam for most of the allotted time, finishing within 15-20 minutes of each other. Those students who simply need more time to work do not feel discouraged by the exodus of the quicker students or a dispirited rout of the poorly-prepared. For my students, the exam has become an opportunity to do well, and the more they persist in their efforts, the better their results will be. My students have become more accepting of the uncertainty in the learning process and more comfortable with that threshold concept.

Sharing Assessment

But from my students' perspective, the most surprising thing I do is to invite them to compose possible essay questions for the exam. We will put up their questions on the overhead; I will email a copy of the questions to them to think about, and in the last class before the exam we will analyze these questions, whittling them down from a large number (7-13) to a set of three questions. The final selection of three is done by a class vote. They know I will choose one of the three questions for all to do, and each student will get to choose on which of the other two they will write. These two essays will be worth 20-25% of the examination grade.

This analysis of the possible questions is a key element for our exam review: in a full-class discussion, we take each question apart to see what it demands of the test-taker, and we discard those questions that seem repetitive or less interesting. After five years of doing this, I have discerned a pattern: for the mid-semester, a few students will pose possible questions. The group first seems tentative about discussing the possibilities inherent in each question; I may need to prime the pump by pointing out that one question would pretty much require students to synthesize information from several chapters or that another one could simply provoke a list as an answer.

But by the end of the mid-semester essay question analysis, most of the class is engaged in the conversation. Within the mid-semester exam, my students see that the exam is set up exactly as I promised; their essay questions appear word for word, and the extra credit opportunity in the exam allows them to revisit a concept the class had struggled with; they have learned that they can trust the process, each other, and me.

For the final examination, class members wind up proposing as many as thirteen possible essay questions, and discussion can become heated as class members lobby the rest of the class for particular favorites or point out the limitations of a particular question. Throughout the discussion, classmates are displaying their knowledge of the course material and engaging in meta-analysis of the exam questions. Moreover, when there is confusion evidenced in this discussion, I become aware of a confusion of concepts and can take the opportunity to address this confusion at that moment, within the classroom, before the students go off for their final prep for the exam.

I always leave these sessions energized and thrilled to discover, in advance of the exam, how much my students have learned. The energy in the classroom changes during this exam prep, and my students become my partners in setting the parameters for evaluation of their work. Ultimately, the mutual trust which develops during these exchanges will remake the ways in which we all interact in class: students become more likely to ask question and offer explanations during class discussions and begin to suggest further ways in which we can maximize their learning potential.

This spring’s suggestion that we use a crossword puzzle in the final exam to assess understanding of the class’s key terms, and the debate the proposal engendered, is a recent example of the ways in which my students are becoming my partners. That class discussion demonstrated both the group’s knowledge of different learning styles and a desire to provide a fair assessment. Our decision to use the crossword as an extra credit question was a good compromise between the enthusiasm of some of the class members and the anxiety of those who feared a crossword puzzle would confuse them.

Sharing Responsibility

Partnering with the students in developing assessments in the class has become standard procedure. I still ask the class, early in the semester, to develop an Oral Report Response Form, but I now insist more strongly on the rights and responsibilities—the partnership—of members in each five-person oral report group. Following the advice of a colleague, Professor Susan Miskelly at Bridgewater State University, as I give out the group 10 minute Oral Report assignment, I explain that the group members have a special responsibility to each other: that in many fields, projects are of necessity addressed by a group of workers, and the managers in such situations have the right to fire workers who do not pull their weight.

In my class, group members must early in the semester read the secondary materials on their topic and meet to determine how they will handle the assignment. Each member of the group must, by the end of that first meeting, have a role to play and tasks to fulfill with regard to developing the group oral presentation. Members of the group have the right to “fire” any

member of the group who does not perform their tasks; this must be done by unanimous vote among the other group members, and can occur only after the errant group member has been approached about their lack of participation at least twice. Of course, on discovering this process, students immediately want to know what will happen to someone who is "fired" in this way: my answer is that the fired students must then consult with me, take on a new topic and develop a 10-minute Oral Report by themselves, which will be held to the same standard as all the group Oral Reports.

So far, in my classes no group has fired one of its members. But by emphasizing the mutuality of their responsibilities and by providing the groups with the mechanisms by which to govern themselves, I have reinforced an environment where the individuals acknowledge responsibility for the success of their group. An interesting side effect is that the group Oral Report Response sheets, which each class member fills out regarding other groups' work, now demonstrate a greater discrimination in the comments. Students offer advice to the groups on what they did well and what they did poorly, and I no longer see vague and unspecific Response comments such as "I liked this" or "This was good." The students have taken a more direct role in assessing the group oral reports, becoming my partners in this endeavor, just as they have become partners of their fellow students in the creation of their own group oral report.

Expanding Partnership Beyond the Classroom

Another result of our partnership in learning has been a redefinition of our learning spaces. As my students come together as a unit inside the classroom, they begin to come together in groups outside the classroom, too. And as they work through and explain the concepts of the course to each other, they begin to evidence an authoritative voice in the field. For example, this spring's class was offered in a room where, with the closing of the door, my class was effectively cut off from the rest of the library; this allowed students to arrive early if they wished to use the classroom itself for group meetings or study sessions like the one I walked in on in my opening vignette.

This change in thinking about where and how we partnered has affected me as well. For example, two years ago, my linguistics class met in a building on the other side of campus where a large foyer with tables, chairs and even easy chairs made it possible for students to meet near our classroom to study together in groups of 8 or 9. When I discovered they were regularly doing so, I began arriving in the building 30 minutes before class was to begin, so that I could be a resource for the study groups. This experience in meeting my students outside of the classroom or my office was so successful that I now routinely arrange an "office hour" before or after the class in a corner of whatever building our classroom is in.

One of my students from this spring commented to me at the end of the semester that after the class began to make decisions together, they began to find it easier to study together and to ask for help across the boundaries between one major department and another. Learning linguistics became for my students a fluid conversation which could and did take place outside the classroom as well as inside.

In Conclusion

As I reflect on how this course has changed over time, I am struck by how much I have changed in my own perceptions about the course and about my role as a teacher. I am neither a "sage on the stage" nor really "the guide on the side": I am a member of a team with a shared goal and a facilitator for growth in learning. I am responding to my students' learning, week by week, and providing them with input into their own learning experience. Each semester, my understanding of my students' strengths and needs grows surer and each semester, they take over more and more responsibility for their learning and the learning of their colleagues.

Perhaps the most satisfying moment for me this semester in Introduction to Linguistics occurred after the final exam, when one of the students came back into the room after the test to tell me that, as she and her classmates were reviewing the coursework together in in a study session for the final exam, "I told everyone, it suddenly dawned on me: we learned a lot! And I never thought I would come away knowing so much." What I have learned is that if instructor and students enter into a learning partnership based on shared goals and trust in each other, the students will walk away with a greater understanding of the course materials.

Of course, I see my course as a work still in progress. Right now, as I rethink the syllabus for fall, I am concerned that my introverted students feel at home in the class. As Alison Cook-Sather noted in "From Traditional Accountability to Shared Responsibility," the faculty members and peer consultants in her study were concerned that some students' voices could be overshadowed by their more assertive classmates. Students can differ in their initial comfort level in speaking in the classroom, so I must find a way to capture the suggestions and voices of my less vocal students.

A variety of circumstances can change the dynamic of a course; for example, the number of winter storm school closings in New England during January 2015 caused me to adapt my syllabus that semester. But there, too, my students and I decided together how to adjust the syllabus to cover the material, while leaving no student struggling alone. All I can be certain of is that my linguistics class this fall will differ from the one I taught last spring. But I have confidence that we can find a balance from which our partnership can grow.

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