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SEEING HOMEWORK THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES: FROM PRESSURED PERFORMANCE TO INTENTIONAL LEARNING

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Introduction and motivation

Introduction to Linguistics (Ling 101) has long been one of my favorite classes to teach. I often get the privilege of introducing students to the field of linguistics, something many students are not familiar with before they enter college.¹ I also view it as an opportunity to educate non-linguists: what do I want future lawyers, doctors, teachers, parents, and voters to know about linguistics? Participating in “Toward Greater Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Within and Beyond Our Classrooms,” a seminar supported by the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and a grant from The Lumina Foundation in Spring 2019, allowed me the opportunity to work closely with a student consultant while conversing weekly with colleagues also dedicated to learning about and enacting more inclusive practices in their classrooms. My work with the student consultant focused on one aspect of my Ling 101 course: homework.

I was curious about ways I could re-think how I was using homework, and in particular the grading of that homework, in my course. The previous design had 8 (near weekly) homework assignments, each one addressing the topic we had covered in class the previous week. So the week after we cover phonology, the phonology homework is due. Meanwhile, we’ve moved on to talking about sociolinguistics in class, etc. I had begun to feel a frustration with the effectiveness of the homework structure-- what I had intended to be an opportunity for learning seemed to be functioning more as an exam. We would discuss a topic in class, the students would do the homework on it, I would grade it and return it-- but then that was the end. There was never a chance to revisit the homework. Though students were provided answer keys and encouraged to attend office hours, the current of the course was moving on and didn’t facilitate that reflecting on what went wrong (or right) in a particular problem set, even if it didn’t explicitly prevent it.

Moreover, this structure seemed to work better for students that were already well prepared for the course in a variety of ways: e.g. students that had already been exposed to linguistics or students who entered college already knowing how to “do college.” Every semester on Day 1 of Ling 101 I would say-- *this class is for everyone*-- and I meant it, but was I fully utilizing the structure of the class to include everyone? Having one chance on each homework favored certain students in class and, perhaps more importantly, missed an opportunity to give everyone a chance to improve their understanding and try again if they wanted to.

Idea and implementation

¹ I would like to thank Jane Chandlee, Jeremy Fahringer, Benjamin Le, Kate Riestenberg, and Miranda Weinberg for their comments on a draft of this essay. I offer my special thanks to Alison Cook-Sather for her mentorship as well as her guidance in developing this piece; the title was her suggestion.

How could I make the structure of homework assignment more clearly about learning? How could I create a more equitable opportunity for students to engage in their own learning through homework? And-- how could I know if what I tried was working? How would it be understood or received by students? These are the questions I brought to Elisa Cooney, the student consultant I was partnered with. At our first meeting, I explained to her my motivation and my idea: in order to shift homework assignments -- and their grading-- away from functioning like punitive exams, I wanted to create opportunities for students to re-do each assignment. For every one homework assignment in the past, there would now be three versions of that assignment. Students would all be expected to do the first assignment, which would be graded and returned with the answer key. If they wanted to, they could do homework attempt number two. If they scored higher, that score would replace the first score. (If they scored lower, their original score would be retained.) If they still wanted to try again, they could do the third homework attempt. The two additional versions of each homework would be similar in size and scope, but not identical; the new homework assignments were created to check understanding of the same material using different questions.²

My hope was that this shift in the structure around grading homework assignments would also shift the way my students thought about homework assignments by lowering the stakes and providing multiple opportunities to return to a challenging concept and demonstrate (improved) understanding. Multiple attempts at a single homework could allow students to practice a “growth mindset” and envision their role in their success in the course differently. High-stakes homework also tends to unequally impact students that already have numerous external pressures on their time and energy including work schedules, health concerns, and family obligations. The flexibility afforded through multiple attempts on each homework might allow students a chance to succeed in the course who otherwise might struggle-- not necessarily because of the content, but because of the structure of the course.

I came to my meeting with Elisa with a solid idea of what I wanted to try and I looked to her for input on how we could best seek to understand how students used and viewed the new structure around homework. Elisa suggested surveying students several times over the course of the term to gauge how they were thinking about these homework assignments and re-do opportunities. She designed the surveys and distributed them: we set aside the last 10 minutes of class five times over the term. After each survey she would write up the results and we would meet up in person to discuss them together. Quotations from these surveys are included in the following section and give the reader a small sense of the richness, depth, and honesty in the responses.

Reflection and looking forward

The student perspectives offered through the surveys, and further understood through conversation with Elisa, were invaluable in my own growing perspective on how I want to use homework in my course. For example, I was surprised after the first survey to learn that students thought the re-do opportunities would make the class easier! That wasn't an interpretation I had anticipated. Even more interesting was that by the third survey, students no longer viewed the

² I am grateful to Joseph Stein (HC '21) for his work in helping develop these additional homework assignments and for the funding from the John B. Hurford Center for the Arts and Humanities at Haverford College to do so.

opportunity to re-do homework as “easy,” but had moved to thinking of the re-do opportunities as back-up plans. They saw the structure of the re-do’s as something that took some of the stress off of them and as a sign that I cared about their learning of the material, as seen in the following quotations from student surveys:

- “The opportunity to do redo’s helped me stress less when I didn’t understand something.”
- “The homework redo’s were nice, as they relieved stress on early attempts and reinforced material in later attempts of necessary.”
- “It gave me the opportunity to stress less and improve on unclear material.”
- “It helped me understand the material more completely, and took pressure off the process of doing homework.”
- “It was helpful since there was less stress during hw and could focus on material.”
- “There is less pressure about grades since I always know I get other chances to really do well, so to speak, so I take my time to understand the material in comparison to other classes with the do or die deadline situations.”

I was originally driven by a discomfort that maybe my homework wasn’t as much of a learning opportunity as I thought it was. Trying out a way to re-situate the grading of the homework in the course helped me see I was right to have been uncomfortable-- and that this small shift in structure (and not content!) allowed students to re-envision what the homework assignments (and answer keys and feedback) meant to them in the course and in their learning.

- “They’ve helped. Makes a big difference in actually learning the material when you can see your mistakes and see why you messed up.”
- “It made me more focused on attempting to learn the material without having the fear or anxiety of getting it right the first time.”
- “It helps me look at my graded homework and the feedback I receive constructively instead of just brushing it aside.”
- “The homework redos gave me the opportunity to understand in more depth the concepts that I was struggling with. Also, it is good for practice. By redoing the homeworks I felt much more engaged with the class and readings.”
- “I liked the additional questions provided on the redo’s, they helped reinforce concepts but didn’t just repeat the same questions from the first attempt. The redo’s also helped me understand the material more throughout the course.”
- “The opportunity to redo homework allowed me to better grasp the areas in which I was confused and then work to improve in these specific areas. It also made graded homework much less stressful.”
- “Even though there were redos I generally took the first attempt very seriously. It didn’t have to be perfect and I could focus more on just figuring out what was being asked.”

Another aspect which shows through in the student responses is that having the option to re-do each homework gave the students more choice and more agency, which I view as an additional positive outcome of this change. The students below reference decisions related to both how they deal with time pressure and decisions around how creative to be:

- “Yes it did. It gave me more practice as well as extra opportunities to do the homework if I was occupied the first time.”
- “It gives me assurance when I’m doing the first attempt and allows me to answer in a more creative way since I know that I can redo it if my answer is not exactly what’s asked for in a question.”
- “Sometimes (depending on the due dates for the homeworks) I will decide to do a homework knowing that I can do a redo.”
- “A time crunch forced me to mail in a bit on first attempt once and rely on second/third.”

The student feedback also helped me conceptualize how to utilize the re-do opportunities in future semesters. For example, no student ever did all three homework attempts. If I hadn’t worked with Elisa to understand how the students were thinking about the re-dos, I might have thought that since no students did all three, I could reduce it down to just one re-do per homework assignment. That would certainly help with due dates! However, by understanding the feedback in the surveys, I came to see that even that third re-do option was valued by the students as a “safety net”-- a chance to re-do the homework yet again, if they wanted-- even if no one decided to use it.

- “I tried my best the first time around and never had to use a redo. It was comforting knowing they’re there though.”
- “I didn’t end up using the redos, but it gave a little less pressure.”
- “To be honest, not really. I thought I would use redo’s more often, but I didn’t at all. Maybe that’s because I didn’t want to have to go back + do more work, so I was careful on the first attempt.”
- “I did not use the opportunity to redo my homework due to doing well on all the first attempts. However, it allowed me to feel more secure that I would have a chance to master concepts.”

I have no doubt that student feedback helped me to understand student perspectives related to the new approach to the homework. This process of providing feedback also seems to have been useful to the students, by creating moments in the course that allowed them to reflect about their learning in a productive way. Noting this, in future iterations of the course, I plan to incorporate a reflective question on all of the homework assignments-- the original as well as the re-dos, to give the students a chance to step back and consider the assignment, their preparedness for it, and their performance on it. This experience has also made clear to me that making my courses more welcoming and inclusive is done most productively in conversation and collaboration with students.

Student Partner’s Perspective: *Elisa Cooney, Bryn Mawr College ‘20*

When Brook initially presented her pedagogical project for the semester to me, I was excited to take part in an assessment that focused on de-emphasizing grading within the classroom. In a perfect world, grades wouldn’t matter, and students could focus solely on their learning process, yet with the current academic pressures weighing on students, it becomes nearly impossible for them not to be consumed with worry over their grades.

Once Brook and I began brainstorming about possible options for this new approach to homework, I thought the best way to measure the ‘success’ of our project would be through listening to student voices. Her primary goal was aimed towards making the classroom more accessible for all, but a question remained: how would students view these changes? I, too, was surprised when the vast majority of the class responded to the first survey indicating that this opportunity to do redo’s made Intro to Linguistics a more manageable class, even though students were not sure how often they would use the repeats.

As the semester progressed, the amount of ‘projected repeats’ decreased to “one or two,” and most answers stressed how much these repeats were appreciated. As an undergraduate myself, just the awareness that there are two or three chances to improve your understanding of course material and then *learn* from your mistakes is extremely valued; in fact, a few students wrote about being able to work through mistakes to tackle difficult concepts because the homework redo’s allowed for a bit more time to process the tasks, while offering the chance of perhaps raising their grade as a result. Since students did not have to fear a bad grade, they felt less pressure doing the homework and therefore enjoyed the challenges of the class more.

By the end of the semester, numerous students were commenting about how much they wished such structure was part of their other classes, a sentiment I shared!