

Backward-designing a graduate phonology seminar

Christopher Geissler
Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf
<https://campuspress.yale.edu/geissler/>

Backward Design^{1,3}

1. Define goals & outcomes first
 2. Identify evidence needed to determine if reached goals
 3. Finally, plan course activities
- Can this framework help plan a graduate seminar?
 - “The Phonetics-Phonology Interface”, Spring 2021, Yale

Context

- 3 Ph.D, 1 BA/MA students
- Everyone knows everyone
- Pandemic: remote
- Instructor: just defended, known as grad student

Goals

- **Read** research articles
- **Discuss** research ideas orally and in writing
- **Conduct** original research reviewing literature
formulate question
test hypothesis
interpret results

Assessment

- **Reading reflection posts**
- **Rotate discussion leaders**
 - extensive written feedback
 - simple grades: 1-5 scale
- **Final Paper**
 - interim deadlines to guide writing process parallel to reading process

Activities

- **Readings** (chosen together)
- **Synchronous discussion**
- **Final paper**
- Theme: structure of a paper
 - “How to read a paper” lesson in first class
- one-page handouts from discussion leaders
- focus writing on process

Results

- Active discussions, all participating
- Discussion posts not commented on, but brought up by students (and me) in-class
- Students (and I!) reported regularly seeing course readings referenced elsewhere
- Students hesitant to propose readings
 - First half: themes chosen by instructor
 - Second half: topics relevant to students’ projects
- “Structure of a paper” *emerged* as a theme through the planning and execution of the course

Conclusions

- Backward Design improved the course, even without radical changes in structure
- Persistence of power dynamics: habit of deferring to instructor
 - Next time: introduce choice of readings more gradually through semester
- Next step: rethink grading!^{2,4}

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