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# Student-Faculty Partnership for Deeper Learning

Ariana Huberman

*Haverford College*, [ahuberma@haverford.edu](mailto:ahuberma@haverford.edu)

Shuning Yan

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## STUDENT-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP FOR DEEPER LEARNING

*Ariana Huberman, Visiting Professor of Spanish, Haverford College*  
*Shuning Yan, Student Consultant, Bryn Mawr College*

In this essay we reflect on the initiatives and ideas that resulted from a very productive semester of partnership through the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) Faculty Pedagogy Seminar at Bryn Mawr College in the Fall of 2012. Ariana's participation in this seminar followed on her participation in a seminar facilitated by Ken Bain in the Spring-2011 semester. Shuning worked as Ariana's TLI student consultant during the Fall-2012 seminar. In this role, she took detailed observation notes in Ariana's classes, met weekly with Ariana to discuss both of their perspectives and thoughts about the class, and gathered feedback from students enrolled in the class. She also met each week with other student consultants and Alison Cook-Sather, coordinator of the TLI, to discuss how best to support faculty in their pedagogical explorations.

In the seminar Ariana took with Ken Bain, participants explored how to create an environment for deep learning and developed "a promising syllabus" — a syllabus that invited students to actively participate in the learning process and offered ways for students to achieve learning objectives (Lang, 2008). Bain introduced the concept of different kinds of learners: deep learners are those driven by a desire to understand meaning lying behind a text; strategic learners are students who are mostly focused on getting a good grade; and surface learners are those who are driven by fear and tend to try to replicate what the professor says (Bain & Zimmerman, 2009). Ariana particularly wanted to explore with Shuning class-time dynamics and ways to improve the feedback loop. The motivation was to find better strategies to help students share successful reading, writing, and studying processes. In sum, we wanted to work on pedagogical transparency in order to establish a dynamic communication venue that allowed for constant adjustments between the professor and the students to support deep learning.

Building on these ideas, the goal for this partnership during the Fall-2012 semester was to foster a deeper learning environment in the classroom. The plan was to apply as a team the ideas Ariana had explored in Ken Bain's seminar and that she had the opportunity to deepen in discussions with Shuning and with other colleagues in the Fall-2012 Faculty Pedagogy Seminar with Alison Cook-Sather. The class that we collaborated in was a literature and culture class offered in Spanish for students with advanced linguistic proficiency. Below is an outline of the strategies explored to foster deeper learning, including:

- sharing study methods
- forming study groups
- engaging in effective feedback and communication
- preparing for class
- moving from small group conversation to class discussion
- closing the language gap

## **Sharing study methods**

At the beginning of the semester, some students were still new to reading long pieces in Spanish (30-50 pages are assigned per class). To facilitate the transition, Shuning gathered anonymous feedback about each student's studying habits. Then she compiled the information and put together a summary for the class. After collecting this feedback and writing the summary, Shuning brought the language barrier issue to her TLI student consultant weekly meeting. There, consultants who had taken such classes or worked with professors on similar higher-level foreign language classes shared with her useful study strategies. The student consultant meetings are a good outside resource for the consultants to bring back feedback to their classrooms in facilitating better learning.

At the end of the next class meeting Ariana gave students a copy of Shuning's summary. She had them read it in silence and then commented on some of the ideas and concerns students expressed and explained the pedagogical purpose of certain aspects of the class and assignments. Finally, she left the classroom and Shuning spoke alone with the students to give them the chance to express their ideas more in depth and to discuss more informally some of their comments.

The purpose of this exercise was to give students the opportunity to learn reading strategies from each other and to find out what else they could do to foster better study practices. Some of the tips included: don't look up every single word you don't know; use an online dictionary instead of paperbacked one for efficiency; Google or Wiki specific knowledge related to the course; use discussion questions as a guide, etc.

Besides the practical "tips" that the students learned in this process, they also witnessed a working partnership between us. We often discussed in front of the students and explained to them what we were trying to do. This approach to pedagogical transparency was meant to model a collaborative working style that we hoped students would follow. Working in groups as a productive learning style is something we discussed often in the faculty seminar, and we believe that it created a constructive learning environment in the classroom.

Class discussions were dynamic, students chose to work in groups, and many reported spontaneously discussing the class materials outside of class. The class dynamic also helped create a deeper level of conversation that cut through language barriers. Because the students were more comfortable with each other, and with the class structure, they were open to take risks they wouldn't have otherwise. This reflects Bain's approaches to fostering deep learning. Active collaboration was also a key aspect of discussion in the TLI seminar with Alison Cook-Sather.

## **Forming study groups**

In the written feedback we found out that some students were informally doing the reading and having discussions together outside of class. When Shuning discussed with fellow TLI consultants about having formal study groups, their experiences suggested having such groups had helped students study in the past. However, when asked whether all the students in Ariana's class would like a formal time outside the class for group studying, students' were not interested.

The informality and flexibility they had until then to choose to get together or not was what made their study groups effective, so we encouraged all students to form such groups on their own outside of class, but the decision was not to structure them. Since no two classes are the same, a method that had worked well for other students did not seem appealing to this group. Respecting and openly responding to students' feedback established a clear sense that they were taken seriously by us as professor and student consultant, and that they were considered true agents in their own learning.

### **Engaging in effective feedback and communication**

Fluid and constant communication was important in making student-driven changes that encourage active participation in the development of this class. Shuning not only took detailed notes in class regarding the class dynamic, she also continued to engage in informal discussions outside of class with students to get more feedback on their learning process. For example, one student complained that there wasn't sufficient space on the sheet between each discussion question for them to write their answers down. After Shuning reported this issue to Ariana, the future discussion questions all started giving students space to take notes.

Small changes like this promoted trust between students and the two of us. Once this relationship was established, getting informal feedback from students got much easier. But building trust between the students and Shuning wasn't a one-step process. As a new TLI consultant, Shuning was able to get the necessary training and support from the TLI consultant seminar she was participating in.

We took several steps in generating a good feedback system. The first step was introducing Shuning to the students in the first class, so there was a clear understanding of her role in the classroom. Engaging in casual conversation before and after the class also helped Shuning to break down the barrier between her and the other students. The next step was gathering useful feedback. Shuning was able to do so through casual conversations and class discussions. The information gathered was discussed between us in weekly meetings and, as previously mentioned, adjustments to the courses were made based on the information.

Once again, the feedback loop we established worked because students knew that Ariana would respond to their requests, so they felt confident in sharing their ideas. The feedback-loop dynamic established in this class fostered student engagement, something that was discussed at length in both Alison Cook-Sather's Faculty Pedagogy Seminar and Ken Bain's seminar. The following modifications were responses to focused written feedback that was requested regularly during the semester.

### **Preparing for class**

As aforementioned, preparation before class is key to understanding the material, being able to think critically about it, and in-class participation. Doing the reading for each class was mandatory. The discussion-question sets were assigned to students beforehand, in order to guide this process.

One response to written student feedback on reading and preparation approaches was to send students the set of discussion questions via email before every class. This helped guide and facilitate their reading process, and it got students better prepared for in-class discussion. Also, in class, Ariana often showed short (10-15 minute) PowerPoint presentations on the author and historical context of the materials.

We asked the students when it would be helpful for them to gain access to these slides and they asked to see them with the question set to be able to understand their readings better before class. Ariana started uploading the presentation to Moodle as early as she could to add extra cultural and/or historic context that could expand students' grasp of the materials. Then she expanded on the slides during class before group discussion. This responsiveness to student feedback helped us support students in moving from being surface to deep learners.

### **Moving from small group conversation to class discussion**

Since this class was discussion based, maintaining an active classroom dynamic was key to effective learning. But having an active discussion does not necessarily mean having a productive idea exchange. At the beginning of this semester, a few active students dominated the discussion. So we decided to look at different strategies to promote participation by everybody. The participation grade was simply not good enough to encourage students to contribute, because it still relied on the self-confidence of students and it mostly incentivized strategic learners. Even in a class like this, where Ariana encouraged different angles and points of views to answer most of the questions, some students still seemed insecure about sharing their ideas, particularly because they had to present them in a foreign language.

The first approach that worked was to allot 5-10 minutes to small group conversations previous to every large class discussion. Students were divided into groups of 2 or 3 to intensively talk about 1 or 2 questions from a question sheet Ariana provided. During their small group exchange, Ariana walked around the room to answer any questions that came up during the process. When moving on to open-class discussion, each group shared their answers to the assigned questions. Students from other groups were invited to chime in with different views. Ariana also added her opinion and any extra context that helped students delve deeper into the concepts. Once the main points in each question were covered, the class moved on to the next small group and discussed the following questions until all questions are answered.

A systematic implementation of this dynamic in every class turned out to be very generative. Overwhelmingly, students gave written feedback on their appreciation for the time to prepare, reflect, and practice as key to their gaining confidence to contribute to the large-group discussion, and more students participated in it than before this change. One of the complaints students had with this dynamic, however, was that after a while, answering the questions group by group could get a bit tedious. This problem was resolved by moving to the open-discussion part faster and only stopping to dig into concepts that caught their interest or that needed extra attention.

Also, students tended to sit in a rather fixed spot in the classroom, so that when working groups, it was often the same students that were working together. Asking students to change group

partners, or develop a seating rotation, could be a good solution to this problem. Students of different linguistic and cultural knowledge and skill can better help each other develop proficiency.

Allowing time for students to prepare in small groups before open discussion had several advantages. The most prominent one was providing students with the opportunity to run through their ideas before presenting to the class. This is especially key to encourage students who are less comfortable with their oral foreign language skills to speak up in front of the whole class. This is also true in terms of accessing the readings' content. Some students mentioned in written feedback that their understanding of the material took a very different turn before and after the small group conversations. Also, going one by one in groups gave each student the chance to share their ideas with the class, which in the long run helped with confidence-building and language skills.

Finally, after a group presented, the opportunity to hear voices from other students added a deeper dimension to the understanding of the material, and that facilitated the development of a well-rounded perspective. Ariana's input after students' comments ensured that the conversation stayed focused and added important layers of cultural and linguistic comprehension. The students' feedback showed that this inclusive, interactive, and multi-dimensional approach fostered deep learning.

Also with deep learning as a goal in mind, Ariana had students come up with written analysis questions for the midterm exam. She made a handout with a summary of questions and discussed with students what made a good question and which ones would likely not be included because they were more fact-checking than analysis and opinion generating. This exercise invited students to be active participants and agents in their own class and encouraged critical thinking. It also prepared them well for the exam.

### **Closing the language gap**

The level of language skills in an advanced-level Spanish class varies among students. There were students who were freshmen, some had never taken a content-based class in Spanish, as well as students who had studied abroad, had taken several other upper level courses in college, and even native speakers who were taking the course because they were interested in the subject. The wide range of language abilities had to be taken into consideration when planning the reading load and discussion questions.

In Alison's seminar, Ariana had been part of discussions about ways to see the whole room and how to individually engage with each student. In Ken's seminar we had discussed the importance of students being interested in the questions or problems that faced them in class. The question sheets and PowerPoint presentations designed for this class were done keeping in mind the diversity of student learning styles and interests. Shuning's input in her observations of students' diverse responses to class activities were invaluable to Ariana's adjustments in class preparation.

## **Conclusion**

During this semester, we worked on creating a class environment in which every student felt confident to contribute to an intense and sophisticated level of class discussion in Spanish. This environment was possible thanks to an effective dynamic between the students and the two of us. Shuning was able to bridge communication gaps between students and the professor, and Ariana's active response to student voices enhanced and encouraged this feedback loop.

The professor-student consultant collaboration set the tone for a "work in progress" approach to learning that we believe the students followed. Written anonymous feedback and the dialogue this feedback opened was essential to making adjustments that quickly produced highly positive results. Active student participation and fluid communication venues inspired students to engage in deeper learning. While traditionally the content of a class has been considered the most important aspect to value a course, we found that an effective class dynamic that adjusts to each student group and is open to modifications has a much bigger impact on the learning quality of the students.

In sum, keeping an active feedback loop allowed Ariana to achieve some of the important goals that were discussed both in the TLI seminar with Alison Cook-Sather and in Ken Bain's seminar. The student-consultant seminar proved to be a key resource as well. Students believed that they were both in control of their own learning and that they could take risks because they had support when they needed it.

## **References**

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