

Student-built theory, or “You only really learn what you figure out for yourself”

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It can be difficult to get students to engage with questions of phonological theory. Students generally find it hard to understand how a new piece of formalism improves the model unless they are invested in building a better theory. A way to get students deeply invested is to put the advancements into their hands. Not only does it require real understanding to be able to propose new pieces of theory, it facilitates truly caring about the state of the formalism. Having students make the observations and proposals that move the class forward, where feasible, has a number of additional benefits, including verifying that they understand the model and giving them the satisfaction that comes with shaping what we do.

In this presentation I'll talk through places in a lower-level phonology course where I have integrated student-driven theory, along with general strategies for doing so. The presentation will offer examples of how students can be led up to the point where something new is needed and can practice stretching outside what is known to make the proposals that move the theory, and the class, forward. This can be done all together as a class, or in small group work, or in homework (or in all three!)