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ADVICE

The 3 Essential Functions of Your Syllabus, Part 2

So students "never read the syllabus"? Here are ways to ensure they do

By James M. Lang | MARCH 30, 2015



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I have the mixed fortune of living in a city that, as of this writing, had the highest total snowfall in the United States this year (woohoo Worcester, Massachusetts!). As a skier, I welcome snow; as a homeowner, I have been both lamenting the massive drifts blocking the streets and driveways of our city and cringing at the thought of the water that will

inundate our basements in the coming thaw.

In anticipation of that flood, I recently pulled a trunk of old books and papers out of the most vulnerable part of my basement, only to discover a lost trove of documents from my college years. I saved much more from my undergraduate and graduate courses than I realized: notebooks, handouts, papers I wrote, and even some syllabi.

The latter documents, now 25 years old, were a fascinating read: They tended to be bare-bones statements of policy, required readings, and due dates. They presented a stark contrast to the syllabi that I use with my own students now: multipage documents with their detailed course descriptions, learning objectives, and schedules.

That evolution of the syllabus was not particular to me. Linda B. Nilson identified it as a trend in her 2010 book, *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*. "Over the past few decades," she wrote, "the syllabus has evolved from a

short, sterile list of required readings, topics, assignments, and dates to an elaborate, detailed blueprint for a carefully constructed learning experience. ... It is rare for an official document to undergo such a radical transformation so quickly."

As you might surmise from Part 1 of this two-part series on how to create what I call a "learning syllabus," this transformation strikes me as a positive development. An effective syllabus can stimulate interest in a course, help students see how it develops and coheres, and provide them with the rationale for the decisions we have made about what and how we want them to learn. Those three essential functions of a syllabus, which I outlined in Part 1, can render it into a document that promotes learning rather than one that simply states contractual obligations between teacher and student.

But whenever the topic of syllabi arises in faculty discussions, and especially when I make the argument that we can use our syllabi to promote learning in our courses, the same objection always arises: Students don't read them. Why should I waste my time making a syllabus into a learning-oriented document, faculty members complain, when students will just glance at it, stick it in their folders, and never look at it again?

That's a legitimate concern. After he read Part 1 of my series, Joe Incandela, an inspiring former professor of mine whose religious-studies class I still remember with fondness, sent me a link to his current online syllabus. It's an absolutely gorgeous document, one that fosters and promotes learning on every page. But it also stretches to more than 30 pages (although the wide array of graphics contributes to that bulky total). Will student engagement with his lovingly crafted syllabus repay all of the time and effort that he put into it?

In answer to that question, I want to finish this series by arguing that a lengthy syllabus can be worth every page — *if* we think about it as a living document, one that continues to inspire and aid students throughout the semester. And it will be a constant source of guidance if, as I recommended in February, you use your syllabus to outline the frame of your course and help students see the arc of intellectual development they will undergo during the semester.

Some faculty members like to think about a syllabus as a map to the course. But whether we are talking about maps on paper or on our phones, we don't look at them once before the trip starts and then put them away. We continue to refer to them (or listen to them) throughout our trip. A map can help get you from one place to the next, but it can also help orient you when you get lost, give you a bird's-eye view of the place you are visiting, and show you how near (and far) other potential destinations might be. I even like to keep maps of foreign cities I have visited hanging around my desk or office for a while after the trip, and glance at them in nostalgic moments, reminding myself of where I have been and where I might still like to visit.

To that end, here are four ways to help your students continue to interact with your syllabus throughout the semester.

The syllabus quiz, Part 1. This idea comes from Linda Nilson's *Teaching at Its Best* book. She argues that a syllabus quiz does not have to be as simplistic and punitive as it might sound. If you hand out and review your syllabus on the first day of class, you can assign a more careful reading of it for the first night of homework. That assignment will be especially worthwhile if your syllabus includes a thorough description of the course as well as its objectives, organization, and logic.

You can quiz your class on any aspect of the syllabus, but Nilson makes a more interesting suggestion. Ask students short-answer questions designed to help them connect their own learning objectives with those of the course: "Which of the learning objectives for this course are most important to you personally, and why?" or "Of the four papers assigned, which are you least (or most) looking forward to writing, and why?" Those kinds of questions, Nilson writes, can "motivate your students to think about the value of your course to them personally and professionally."

Don't feel obligated, by the way, to use the first class to review the syllabus. You might choose instead to create an opening-day activity that demonstrates the fascinating nature of the discipline or the course, and let students know you'll review the syllabus next time. In that case, you could still hand out the syllabus at the end of class, and ask them either to answer questions about it, or bring in their own questions, in that second class.

Detailed learning objectives. Many faculty members are already required to spell out their learning objectives on the syllabus. I receive an email from an administrator each semester reminding me to put them there. But those objectives strike me as likely to zip right out of the minds of your students after that first-class review — unless you explain why they should care and keep caring.

Nilson's quiz questions are one approach. A second route: Set detailed objectives for every assignment and even for a specific class session, and link them to the larger learning objectives of the course. For example, instead of simply putting down page numbers on the syllabus for the next reading assignment, take a few minutes to note the purpose of each new reading or set of problems. Use language that connects the daily work to the larger course goals. If you scroll down to the schedule section of Joe Incandela's syllabus, you will see that each day's entry includes a set of "Homework Learning Outcomes" and "Seminar Learning Outcomes."

One of the major differences that separates expert learners (faculty) from novice learners (students) is the ability to see the frameworks in addition to the individual pieces. The frameworks seem obvious and natural to you; they do not appear so to your students. Just as you can use your class schedule to lay out the intellectual structure of your course, you can use it to make transparent and continually engage students with the learning objectives of the course.

The blank syllabus. If we want students to learn for mastery, rather than simply for a grade, we have to help them feel as if they are in control. You can find research on the importance of this principle in a range of books on teaching and learning in higher education, from James Zull's *The Art of Changing the Brain* to the multi-authored *How Learning Works*. Students who feel controlled or manipulated by the classroom environment tend to check boxes rather than truly engage with the material.

So consider leaving a portion of your syllabus open for students to help create. I first heard of this idea from Chris Walsh, an assistant professor of English at Boston University, who spoke about his technique of allowing students to peruse their anthologies in the opening weeks of the semester and help select the readings for his American literature survey.

But if you can't cede that kind of control, you can find other ways to give students a shared role in course creation: Offer a menu of possible assignments and ask the class to pick the ones that will count for a grade. Give students a choice of how to weigh assignments you have selected. Or give them the responsibility for offering you a list of possible final projects and choose one for them to complete. No matter how you do this, explain that their choices have to align with the learning objectives of the course, and require them to state the connections and rationale for their decisions.

The syllabus quiz, Part 2. Another clear principle that emerges from learning research is that students need repeated, spaced exposure to course topics. In *How We Learn: The Surprising Truth About When, Where, and Why It Happens*, Benedict Carey says "spaced-out study is as close to a freebie as anything in learning science." It's cheap and easy, and can be incorporated into any course.

So every few weeks, end class with a different type of syllabus quiz. Stop 10 minutes early, ask students to pull out the syllabus (or pull it up online), and then point to a past topic or reading and ask them to write whatever they remember about it, or write about how it connects to what you covered that day, or what they still need help with. Do that once a week, and you will not only draw students back to the syllabus and provide spaced exposure to your course topics, you will also give them enormous help in preparing for any cumulative exams you might give, since they will be continually revisiting and rethinking earlier course content.

Of course any of these exercises mean students have to bring the syllabus to class every day, or have it open on their devices. Don't be shy about that; make it a requirement. Every time you walk out of your hotel room in a foreign city, until you become an expert in its geography, you bring your map (paper or electronic). Your students should do the same.

If you have carefully crafted the syllabus, and want students to read it, then make it part of every class period. They will benefit from that habit more than you might expect — especially if it can help them keep one eye always on the big questions and learning objectives of the course.

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