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ADVICE

The 3 Essential Functions of Your Syllabus, Part 1

Your plan for your class is more than a contract with your students



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By James M. Lang | FEBRUARY 23, 2015

Our campus teaching center recently invited a brave group of student tutors to share their views on effective teaching with our faculty. The four tutors reported what they had heard from students about course designs and teaching practices that seemed to help, and ones that seemed to interfere with learning. Three

recurrent themes in the tutors' remarks caught my attention.

First, they suggested that students needed more help in seeing the large organizational sweep of a course. Undergraduates who came to the tutoring center often had no idea how the first week of the semester in a class connected to the last, or even how different units related to one another. For many students, courses appear less as logical progressions than as, to quote the American writer Elbert Hubbard, "one damn thing after another." So course designs that might seem so clear and elegant to us as faculty members, apparently, do not always appear so lucid to our students.

Second, the tutors said faculty members needed to be much more transparent in their teaching. Students may not see the reasoning behind why Monday is a lecture and Wednesday a discussion, and how our expectations for those very distinct pedagogical models might differ.

Some of the tutors even reported being confused about what they should take away from class discussions, or how they fit into the larger picture of a course. Class discussions that sparkle with life and energy, and that we view as triumphs of great teaching, might just seem pointless and confusing to students.

Finally, the tutors suggested that we could do a better job of sharing our excitement about our disciplines. "We know you have passion for the course material," one of the panelists said, "but students don't always see that in classes. I know that when professors get really excited about what they are teaching, it makes me more curious and interested to find out about it." Without that contagious energy from the professor, they noted, it was especially hard to become motivated in required or introductory courses.

I came away from the gathering with a lot of ideas, but the most immediate conclusion I drew was: It's time to rethink my syllabus. A more thoughtful approach to this essential classroom document, and to my use of it throughout the semester, could help alleviate the three major concerns articulated by those tutors.

The "learning syllabus." In this two-part series on the creation and use of what I will call a "learning syllabus" in college and university courses, I want to argue for three essential functions that a syllabus should play in any course. Those three functions do not exhaust the list of what a syllabus should contain or accomplish, but thinking about the implications of these three things will go a long way toward populating your syllabus with the standard material it should have and, at the same time, add elements that will support student learning and that we can return to over and over again throughout the semester.

Too often I hear of the syllabus spoken of as a contract, and I understand that it has a contractual function. But surely we can do better than handing out a contract to our students on the first day of class. Ultimately the syllabus should serve the same purpose as every other aspect of the course: It should help students learn. Consider the following three principles as driving a learning approach to this essential course document.

Make promises. The "promising syllabus" is a concept based on the research of Ken Bain. He's argued for years that the syllabus should be a place to demonstrate your energy and excitement for the course content. Because this document often represents the first official meeting between your students and your course material, it can be an ideal moment to help them recognize the value of the content and stimulate their interest in learning it.

Bain developed the notion of a promising syllabus by looking at the syllabi of dozens of highly effective and award-winning faculty members. What he saw there, he explains in his 2004 book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, were syllabi in which faculty members would "lay out the promises or opportunities that the course offered to students. What kind of questions would it help students answer? What kind of intellectual, physical, emotional, or social abilities would it help them develop?" The syllabus "represented an invitation to a feast, giving students a strong sense of control over whether they accepted."

Does your syllabus offer students an invitation to an intellectual feast? Are you promising students that—if they put in the required work—your course will help them gain deep new insights into life? Or valuable skills that will benefit them throughout their careers? Or knowledge that will enable them to succeed in their chosen professions?

Or, instead, does your syllabus offer some version of the statement "In this course we will cover ... , " which is the syllabus equivalent of presenting your lectures in a dull monotone, in a darkened room, from behind a podium?

You no doubt believe in the value of your discipline and your course. You believe it has something incredibly valuable to offer to your students. The challenge of the learning syllabus is to convey that value to students. You want to convince them, in that initial meeting, that learning in your course, if they put in the effort, could change their lives for the better. A learning syllabus exudes the enthusiasm that will stimulate the curiosity of students.

Orient your students. Your syllabus, through its course description or schedule, should help students recognize the course's larger organizational framework and continue to see it throughout the semester. Students should be able to pull out their syllabus in any class period and use it to help identify where the course has been, where it stands now, and where it is headed.

That can happen in different ways. Some faculty members like to plot out the course on the syllabus in great detail, including the topics and readings covered in each class session, the due dates for homework and other assignments, and the dates of all quizzes and examinations. Predicting all of that before a course even begins can be a difficult and time-consuming task, but it does help students envision the whole course from the outset of the semester. And as the tutors explained, that also helps students plan their schedules effectively. Dropping an unexpected exam or assignment date on students midsemester might mean that those who have carefully planned out their studying time around work and extracurriculars now have to rearrange everything in their lives to accommodate your late decision.

Still, in some cases it may be best to leave room for flexibility on a syllabus. Where I live, we have had three vast snowstorms in the past three weeks, each of which entailed a day of class cancellations. Faculty members who had mapped out their schedules in intricate detail are now fumbling a bit. Likewise, faculty members should be flexible enough in their planning to accommodate students' problems or events within or outside of the class.

But aside from the question of how much you want to pin down the dates, the key to this principle is laying out the content of the course in ways that enable students to see the learning arc. Undoubtedly the topics of your course build on one another throughout the semester. Does the course also divide up into logical units? Do certain topics recur from one week to the next? Can you find ways to indicate those kinds of progressions, divisions, or cycles on your syllabus?

New learners in a subject area typically need help seeing frameworks and big pictures. A learning syllabus can help them acquire that vision from the first day of the semester.

Be transparent. So much of what we heard from the tutors on the panel, and so much of what I hear from my student advisees, is puzzlement: Why are we doing *this*?

Our tutors reported their bafflement, for example, about how to approach and learn from class discussions. Were they supposed to take notes on what their classmates said? Were they responsible for things their classmates said on exams? How about seemingly casual comments made by the professor during the discussion? Should they write those down?

Students may have such questions about almost everything we do in class: Why do we take quizzes? What's the purpose of these presentations? Why should I have to take a cumulative final exam? Why do you grade participation?

The rationale for all of those decisions might be clear enough in *your* mind, but how often do you answer those questions for your students? If they never hear answers, they might see your course practices and assessments as hoops to jump through or boxes to tick instead of opportunities to learn and improve.

So consider the syllabus as a place to set down in writing the rationale for what you do in the course. The learning syllabus should be a transparent syllabus, a place where your students can find answers to the questions that might arise when they are struggling with a difficult assignment or wondering why they should trudge across a cold snowy campus for a discussion session on a Friday morning.

Creating such a learning syllabus, though, won't get you very far if students don't pay close attention to it. So the syllabus represents the place to put—in concrete terms—the incredible value of your course, the organization of its parts, and the logic behind it. But a true learning syllabus does not simply reside in the paper or electronic folders of your students; it sparks and maintains a continuing conversation about your course, and about the learning of your students.

Next month, in the final part of this series, we'll consider how the learning syllabus should form a regular part of your course, as a living document that can inspire and guide students throughout the semester.

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