

Sweeping the Dust Off of the Syllabus with Broadly Inclusive Teaching Strategies

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Why bother putting effort into a syllabus that the students do not read? The syllabus can be a dense, lengthy document weighed down by university and departmental required statements and expectations. But students do read the syllabus, even if only for certain sections and on an occasional, as-needed basis. Updating the syllabus beyond changing the due dates each semester likely is a low priority for instructors among many competing demands on their time, unless they are redesigning the course. However, the syllabus also can be a useful way to establish the path for the course in terms of both the logistics and the implementation.

Purpose of the Syllabus

The syllabus can be a tool that works to support both the students and the instructor. The multiple purposes of the syllabus – as sort of a perceived legal document or contract (though it is not actually), an organizational tool, and a means of communication (Eberly et al., 2001) – are complicated by additional layers of being the public face for a course at a state institution, as well as use in transfer and determining course equivalency (Bers et al., 1996). At surface level, what seems to be a simple schedule and reading list, becomes a complicated document fraught with scrutiny at many levels.

Setting the Tone

Yet, the syllabus still can set the foundation for the course and support everyone in the space. A first pass at the presentation, the word choice, and the tone can demonstrate a commitment to shared values and learning, creating an atmosphere of inclusion and community, even before the first day of the term. For example, this may include considering what and how things are said (Columbia, 2023), balancing warm and cold language use (Stanford, 2023), and avoiding all-caps writing (Hogan & Sathy, 2022). The warm/cold language shift can be as simple as shifting “late work will be penalized by 50%” to “late work is still eligible for 50% partial credit” (Stanford, 2023). None of this includes removing or reducing student accountability or expectations, giving up deadlines, or changing anything but *how* we convey information. While more flexibility in deadlines may work in some spaces and courses, simply conveying the same information slightly differently and in a more supportive framing, though, can establish a very different type of course.

Course Policies

Beyond overall tone, the other course policies are another frequent stop for students. Demonstrating our values around the success of all students through the syllabus also establishes a positive tone for the class. Certainly the late policy is a always common area of interest for students, but considerations around important dates (your institution may have a list of important holidays/observances to use), caregiving needs, chronic illness considerations, camera on/off for online/hybrid courses, and more can demonstrate your values and

approaches around reasonable openness, flexibility, understanding, and communication (Duke, 2023). Further, expectations and policies also do not need to exist in a vacuum. Discussing with colleagues, consulting with your teaching and learning center, or assistant dean for teaching can help to develop policies that fit well with other programmatic expectations and, conversely, shape policies for all that are more broadly inclusive of everyone in the space.

Readings and Resources

The readings and resources present an opportunity for considering – or re-considering – the voices that are being heard in the course and, importantly, the voices that may not be currently heard. We might think about whether the authors, speakers, or voices represent a diversity of individuals (Sathy & Hogan, 2022) across many aspects of diversity – experience, location, identity, role, education, and other dimensions relevant to life and the field of study. We also may consider the cost of the course materials (e.g., textbooks) and the possibility of open access materials (Sathy & Hogan, 2022), as this can increase affordability and accessibility. Yet, even if we cannot change the readings and resources – for example if this is one section of a multi-section course – we might consider again the voices being heard and use this as an opportunity to be creative. Perhaps there are ways to highlight different experiences and voices, such as career or professional paths with a featured practitioner of the week.

Grading

If it speaks to us, we might also consider discipline- and course-specific methods to demonstrate a growth mindset and, perhaps, applying proficiency-based grading strategies. The key priority across disciplines may often be the goals of fostering collaboration, not competition, among our students (Sathy & Hogan, 2022). Seeing each other as learning resources and partners in the educational process may create a better learning environment, as it helps to demonstrate value for each of the individuals in the course and what they can contribute to the environment. Further, the approach to dividing larger, high-stakes assignments (Hogan & Sathy, 2022) into scaffolded learning sequences supports both student engagement and the overall learning process.

Creating “Better” Educational Spaces

Other design ideas, even if we cannot or do not want to redesign the course as a whole, can be incorporated at individual lesson or unit levels. Integrating relevant aspects of the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) may support a different level of engagement for the course (US Department of Education TEAL, 2010). These may include having multiple methods and representations for delivering information, multiple options for learners to show their course learning, and engaging students through choices, tools, and opportunities. Essentially, what we can create are opportunities for accessibility and engagement beyond the legal requirements (Georgetown, 2023). Efforts beyond the bare minimum can be positive for everyone in the space.

Overall, not all educational spaces work for everyone (Yoho, 2022), just as not all physical spaces work for everyone. As such, it becomes imperative – if we want to support all students – that we integrate strategies that work for our course modality, field of study, and instructional

strategies. Without a doubt, many of these strategies involve work. In a climate where instructors are so frequently overburdened, it is often difficult to justify *any* additional labor beyond the many aspects already needed. The investments in areas that support student learning, not only can provide positive outcomes, but can also support us as the instructor. Increased student satisfaction, retention, multiple aspects of diversity in the courses and programs, and decreased need for individual alternative assignments and course accommodations also benefit the instructor (UNSW, 2023). While “better” courses may improve learning and the overall student experience, particular consideration to how these changes may impact individual instructors is pertinent. For example, shifts to flipped classrooms and more active learning strategies can have varying student receptions and potential impacts on course evaluations (Jensen et al., 2015; Samuel, 2021; Shekhar, 2020). Impacts on course evaluations are unequally influential on certain faculty, depending on identity and positionality, with common mental health and potential negative impacts noted across academia (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023), particularly as structural changes are needed to work towards more reasonable and equitable evaluations of teaching (Yoho & Reid, 2024).

What is often seen as a stagnant document to simply change the dates each semester can instead be an opportunity to set the tone for a transformative learning experience. Low barrier next steps in the process of reconsidering the syllabus might be syllabus swaps with colleagues for feedback or even having a friend or family member review it for general tone and readability. Students are also valuable resources, as a student or teaching assistant may provide insights on the perceptions, presentation, or how the statements might be received outside of our own heads. While additional time investment in the syllabus, on the surface level, may not seem like a valuable investment in an already overstretched schedule, these efforts may have far-reaching positive impacts for everyone in the educational space.

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