Fundamentals of Syllabus Design

It's tempting to treat a syllabus as a contract that indemnifies the instructor against grade or policy disputes while providing students an exhaustive course handbook. But the reality is that even the most detailed, prescient syllabus can't cover every need or occasion. Moreover, the longer (and more policy-driven) a syllabus is, the less likely that students will read it—making all the time of drafting largely wasted. Of course, a department or school may require certain common elements, but shifting our thinking from the syllabus as operational manual allows us to conceive of it as a welcoming support tool. Approached thusly, it can provide students an invitation to the most complex questions you'll take up, demonstrate their agency as learners, and prime them to respond to challenges and setbacks effectively.

Some ways to build an effective syllabus:

- **Reflect your values.** Think of a syllabus as an implicit statement of values that serves in part as a first impression, and ensure the document you distribute enacts your principles as a teacher, practitioner of your discipline, and writer.
- **Imagine use cases.** How do you *want* students to use the syllabus? How do you expect they *will* use it? What can you do to structure the syllabus so students use it effectively? How can you format it for the greatest legibility and organizational coherence? In short, draft a syllabus just as you would any other piece of writing—by considering your readers' needs and identifying strategies to meet them.
- **Prioritize content—which may mean cutting.** You'll definitely need to include at least three elements: a course description and goals statement that lays out the opportunities the course provides to students, a concrete representation of the experiences and activities the class will undertake to meet shared goals, and a description of how students' progress toward mastery will be assessed. In addition to these core components, you'll very likely also include resources for support, both within and beyond the classroom, and broadly applicable procedures—those that hold true across assignments and class sessions.
- **Consider addenda.** For more detailed policies or information that pertains only to a portion of the course, you might create additional documents as the semester unfolds, creating a suite of cumulative materials.
- **Use the first day of class.** The first class session is an ideal time to work closely with the syllabus by, for example, inviting students to read key portions aloud; engage in **metacognition** about their expectations, needs, and experiences as learners; discuss challenging units or assignments and identify support resources; and practice exploring some of the course's biggest questions or problems together.
- **Be flexible.** We all need syllabi that can evolve alongside a class's learning pace, so anticipate some shifted schedules and changed readings. Whenever you revise the syllabus, provide an updated version, rather than relying entirely on a verbal change in class.

References

Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Slattery, Jeanne M., and Janet F. Carlson. "Preparing an Effective Syllabus: Current Best Practices." *College Teaching* vol. 53, no. 4, 2005, pp. 159–164. Digital.

See also

Designing Documents for Students
Establishing Learning Goals
Establishing Policy and Procedure

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