

Syllabus under Construction: Involving Students in the Creation of Class Assignments

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## SYLLABUS UNDER CONSTRUCTION: INVOLVING STUDENTS IN THE CREATION OF CLASS ASSIGNMENTS\*

*Collaborative teaching techniques are designed to alter the relationship between the professor and the students in order to share the process of learning class materials. In a collaborative classroom, students are encouraged to participate in the design and implementation of class materials. This paper presents an exercise in which the students are required to develop the assessment criteria for a class in introductory sociology. In the first class session, students are given a syllabus including only topical headings and are charged with constructing the list of graded assignments. It is noted that, by and large, students respond positively to being included in the design of the class syllabus, and some of the logistical concerns and pedagogical constraints of implementing this exercise are described.*

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THIS PAPER DESCRIBES an exercise in which students develop a set of assignments to assess their performance in an introductory sociology class. Students are engaged during the first few classes in creating their assignments for the semester with the goals of setting a tone of collaborative learning from the first day of class and enhancing participation and student ownership of the class. In the words of Rinehart (1999), this exercise is designed to shift students from the role of educational consumers to "co-creators of a common life" in the classroom. In providing a framework for this exercise, Haynes (2001) notes that such student empowerment can lead to increased motivation and participation and improved problem-solving skills.

Collaborative learning classrooms are

distinguished by a number of unique features: learning is active rather than passive, the teacher acts as a facilitator, teaching and learning are shared experiences between students and faculty, lecture is balanced with small-group activities, and both social and team skills are developed through the give-and-take of consensus building (Matthews et al. 1995). In a collaborative learning model, teachers and students work as a team to create a learning environment characterized by interdependence and power sharing. This model acknowledges that knowledge is a social construct in which the teacher's role is to create an environment where the students can create meaning from class content (Smith and Waller 1997).

Much research has been done on the effects of collaborative learning. This research notes that collaborative classrooms tend to be associated with more substantive course content, higher levels of student satisfaction, increased student effort, higher levels of academic persistence, and the development of stronger interpersonal relationships among students and faculty (Baker 1999; Marx 1998). Collaborative learning techniques can also build trust between students and faculty. Brookfield (1999) de-

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scribes "taking students seriously" as an essential prerequisite to creating effective learning relationships. Clearly, the increased opportunities for student input in the collaborative classroom signal to students that their opinions matter. As a result, collaborative classrooms are characterized by consensus building (Brufee 1999). Through increased interaction in learning, students observe that they are co-creators of knowledge; this observation in turn enables them to recognize their individual ways of discovery and understanding. In addition, students in collaborative settings learn social skills (e.g., the ability to work through an issue with a group). These types of learning experiences provide them with knowledge and skills that extend beyond the content matter of the course (Johnson and Johnson 1997; Vella 1994).

Some research has hypothesized that students arrive on campus focused on the social aspect of college and need to establish and stabilize peer relationships before they can concentrate on academic tasks (Moore 1998). In this regard, collaborative class environments may be more effective because they enable students to address their social and academic interests simultaneously. Collaborative classrooms may also be popular because they accommodate a variety of learning styles (Johnson 2001). However, collaborative techniques require a certain amount of flexibility and openness on the part of the instructor and they may not be fully effective if not employed carefully (Marx 1998; Rinehart 1999).

Another crucial component of collaborative learning experiences is overcoming power relations in the classroom (Gamson 1994). Theoretically, an instructor in a collaborative classroom must be willing to "let go" and be guided by student interests and concerns in such a way that the relationship between students and instructor and between students and material are primarily student-guided. This shift in power affords the students increased opportunities for input into course content, the format in which the material is presented, and the manner in which

their performance is assessed.

Sweet (1998) argues that such radical shifts in power are rarely fully achieved, in part due to institutional constraints that serve to limit instructional options. The exercise described here demonstrates power shifting in a way that is immediately tangible to students. Students are put into an active role on the first day of class and asked to provide input into the course syllabus (and, arguably, the infrastructure of the course). Empowering students in this way at the outset sets the tone for a participatory learning experience.

### THE EXERCISE

My introductory sociology classes are typically comprised mostly of freshmen and a small percentage of upper classmen. Most of the students who enroll seek to fulfill a core requirement, although each semester a student or two chooses to major in Sociology. I spend a portion of the first class session discussing the collaborative techniques that characterize my teaching style. I advise students that they will be assigned to a small group for the remainder of the semester and that in many of our class sessions, they will participate in an exercise, discussion, or some sort of project with their group members. I also encourage students to consider group work as one option for graded work as they begin to construct their assignments for the semester.

During one of the initial class lectures, I discuss various group decision-making techniques. The students are encouraged to consider both the group's decision outcomes and decision processes as important learning experiences. Throughout the various group activities in the semester, I am careful to emphasize and guide the students towards the application of core course concepts in the text, but I allow this to happen as the discussion evolves rather than using a pre-determined lecture format. In this sense, I present the assignment creation exercise described in this article as an introductory collaborative learning exercise—one that sets

the tone for my expectations regarding student participation for the rest of the semester.

After providing the students with an overview of my pedagogical style, I distribute a “skeleton” of the class syllabus, including a topic for each week along with the text and supplemental readings corresponding to each topic. No assignments appear on the syllabus, and students are told that their first task of the semester will be to create the assignments by which their performance in my class will be assessed. I have limited the “creative” aspects of this project to the development of graded assignments rather than the construction of the entire syllabus for several reasons. First, since this is an introductory course, many students have only a vague sense, if any, about the topics that will be covered. Second, although students can readily discern the topics to be studied by looking at the text, teaching these topics could be cumbersome without consideration of the order and context in which they would best be presented. Finally, while it might be interesting to begin the class with no text and a random list of topical areas listed on the board, the logistics of ordering textbooks makes this approach impractical.

The texts I have generally used for Introductory Sociology are Newman, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000); Finsterbusch, *Sociology 00/01: Annual Editions* (Guilford, CT: Dushkin, 2000); and Finsterbusch, *Taking Sides: Social Issues* (Guilford, CT: Dushkin, 2000). I use the Newman text to provide a theoretical overview for each of the topics we will cover and the *Annual Editions* text as a supplemental reader. It has been my experience that students who struggle with the concepts as they are presented in Newman can often readily become engaged in a discussion of social issues related to these concepts. The *Annual Editions* text provides the students with “real” examples of sociology in action and offers them a potentially broader range of material from which to create their as-

signments. I also include a second Finsterbusch text, *Taking Sides*, on the required reading list, although I do not formally include assigned readings from it in the “skeleton” syllabus. Instead, the students are encouraged to examine which issues from this text interest them and how they wish to incorporate several of these into the class syllabus. *Taking Sides* presents topics in a debate-oriented format; however, I have used this text as the basis for a broad array of assignments including formal class debates, papers, and class discussion exercises.

As their first homework assignment, students are charged with independently developing a list of assignments for the semester using the class texts and topical assignments outlined on the “skeleton” syllabus. I encourage students to reflect on the assignments in a number of ways. First, they must consider the *types* of assignments they prefer (e.g., quizzes, oral reports, etc.). Next, they must discern their preferences for *content* of the assignments. For example, if a student indicates that she favors a series of exams, should the exams be multiple choice or essay? Students are also instructed to examine the *timing* of the assignments. Specifically, they are asked to look at their calendars for the semester and decide whether they prefer due dates that are more traditional (e.g., a midterm during midterm week) or whether they prefer assignments scheduled at alternate times. This aspect of the exercise has the added bonus of helping them to assess their workload for the entire semester. I also encourage the students to think about *diversity* in assignment types, the *quantity* of work to be performed and the *weighting* of the various assignments (such that poor performance on one assignment does not automatically equate to a poor grade in the class). Finally, I ask the students to choose the six issues from *Taking Sides* they find most interesting and to reflect on how these issues might be incorporated into the class in either a graded or non-graded format. I provide the students with a written handout for submitting their

assignment preferences (see Appendix), and instruct students to return to the next class meeting with their assignment sheets completed, ready to discuss their choices.

At the start of the second class, I immediately divide the students into their assigned groups and give them about thirty minutes to develop a group consensus on an assignment list for the semester. The membership of each group is essentially random; however, since I teach at a college that is predominantly female, I am careful to try to provide a mix of genders in each group when feasible. To the extent possible, I also try to distribute the few upperclassmen among various groups since in most instances they offer a more "seasoned" perspective. I offer the class a brief overview of group decision-making strategies, such as brain-storming on a particular topic or allowing each member to speak in turn and developing a comprehensive list for discussion, then charge the groups with creating a single list of assignments. Once group deliberations are complete, I ask that a representative from each group write its final assignment list on the board for class discussion.

In my experience, the group lists are characterized by a fair amount of overlap. While students infrequently generate an innovative idea (e.g., an in-class group exam), the vast majority of the assignments are fairly traditional and discussion focuses on preferences for exams, papers, or oral presentations, as well as the timing and weighting of these various assignments. As the instructor, I try to orchestrate class-wide discussion such that each member of the class feels comfortable expressing his or her preferences.

Once the class has developed and agreed upon a single set of assignments for the semester, I incorporate the information onto a final version of the syllabus. At the start of our third class meeting, the students are given one last opportunity to review the assignments and to ask any outstanding questions. I have structured this session as the last opportunity for class input on the

assignment list. My experience shows that after several class sessions with an open-ended syllabus, students are anxious to bring closure to the assignment list. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we are into the second week of classes at this point, and the students' workloads for other classes have been set.

The performance of students in classes using a collaboratively constructed syllabus is unique in several ways. In my experience, few students fail or perform poorly in classes where they have been involved in constructing the assignment list. I attribute this in part to the open discussion of assessment and performance that begins in the very first class session. Thus, the average student grades for these classes tend to be slightly higher, primarily because the grades of the poorest performers improve under this system. In addition, I tend to have more interaction with students at both the high and low ends of the grade curve in these collaborative classes. High performing students typically want to discuss clarification of assignments and process, while students performing poorly frequently request extra credit opportunities. In sum, these interactions suggest that students who have collaborated in constructing their assignments become more personally invested in the course content and the evaluation of their performance.

### POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

The main difficulty I have experienced in implementing this exercise is logistical. Because the assignment list is not finalized until the third class meeting, the syllabus must remain a working document for a couple of weeks into the semester. Typically, the beginning of the semester is a busy time and the job of having to finalize the syllabus while teaching poses somewhat of an added burden. I have found it helpful to construct the class assignments with due dates as a separate sheet, to be attached to the "skeleton syllabus" as an appendix. I also encourage students to add assignment due

dates to the class outline so that these important dates appear in two places.

Interestingly, the student-generated list of assignments has not been terribly innovative, employing the standard types of assignments typically provided in an introductory course (e.g., some short papers, exams and oral presentations). While I was initially surprised by this lack of creativity, I attribute it to the fact that by the time they enroll in an introductory college course, students have been socialized in secondary school to recognize and accept traditional methods for performance assessment. One strategy for counteracting this narrow view of assignment types might be to leave assignments off of the syllabus further into the semester, conducting several other collaborative exercises during the course's initial weeks, and then engaging the students in assignment creation. This would give the students a chance to become comfortable with one another, to experience the collaborative classroom environment more fully, and to witness my encouragement of student innovation. Likewise, the delay would allow students to gain a better understanding of the course content and they might be better prepared to think of creative ways to demonstrate their knowledge. This strategy might be more effective in an advanced class, where students are more familiar with the "traditional" framework of college courses and so may have less anxiety about needing to finalize the assignment list.

Another difficulty that can arise from the collaborative assignment exercise is some students' perception of the course syllabus as a document that can be negotiated throughout the entire semester. In particular, I have observed that students who have helped create the assignment list are more likely to seek new extra-credit opportunities midway through the semester. For this reason when I hand out the final syllabus in the third class, I stress to students it represents the *final* list of assignments for the semester. They will not again be allowed to reconstruct, add to, or otherwise alter the list. The majority of students seem to prefer this closure and the security of knowing what

the course requires of them. This is especially true for higher-performing students who begin working on their assignments well in advance of due dates. As in the traditional class, the syllabus becomes a "contract" for students' work load, and it can be unnerving when students suspect that assignments could be created or dropped throughout the course of the semester.

As one student notes in her evaluation, the main limitation of this exercise is that it uses class time that could be used for teaching purposes. Some students view the creation of assignments as the "instructor's job." However, only a minority of students express this sentiment. Even students who indicate concern over lost class time describe the syllabus construction exercise as providing them with other benefits such as getting to know their classmates sooner and having an appreciation for developing assessment tools.

## CONCLUSION

Student feedback in relation to the syllabus construction exercise has been overwhelmingly positive. I assess student reactions to the exercise both at the beginning and the end of the semester. Where concerns are noted, they typically speak to the content of individual assignments such as group work. Only a few students have described the task of constructing assignments as "confusing" or "difficult." Many students also comment that their class participation increased as a result of being engaged in this process. As one student notes: "I enjoyed taking an active part...[The exercise] affected my perceptions, as I enjoyed the class and took a more active role." These comments contrast with my observations that no dramatic difference exists in the level of class discussion and participation between regular classes and those where the assignments are developed collaboratively.

Why do students perceive that their participation is enhanced? It may be that certain students *are*, in fact, more active than they might have been in a traditional class-

room, while the participation of others is more subdued. Perhaps when students recognize that their participation is welcomed, they actually perceive that they participate more. It would be interesting to implement this exercise in conjunction with more specific techniques targeted to enhance discussion and class participation such as “buzz groups” or the creation of an “inner circle” (McKeachie 1994). The inclusion of such techniques might yield a more fully student-driven class in terms of both content and process.

Student comments suggest that the assignment construction exercise enhances their learning experience beyond the content matter of sociology. As one student describes: “It was like giving us the power which was a different thing. Instead of just walking into a class and receiving an agenda, we made our own.” Many students express feelings of being “in control” or that I was “interested in their opinion.” In this regard, the exercise provides an important opportunity to reinforce the sociological concepts of inequality and power and the extent to which such structural arrangements constrain behavior. Presented in this context, this exercise could be used to demonstrate the notion that power can be shifted, and the class might be engaged in an assessment of how behaviors can change when power gradients are altered.

As a result of this exercise, students learn at the outset that their opinions matter and thus they are more immediately immersed in the learning process. One student summarizes this perspective quite well: allowing students to “...choose their assignments is a way to earn their respect and by doing that they’ll listen.” Listening is an essential first step in the process of engaging students more fully in the classroom experience.

## APPENDIX

### *What Will Your Assignments for the Semester Be?*

*What is the process for deciding on class assignments?*

The syllabus lists the topics and readings we will cover this semester. We will begin our second class with a small group exercise. During this exercise, *you* (as a class) will decide the assignments for the entire semester. You will begin this process in small group discussions. We will then bring all the groups together and decide as a class on a final list of graded assignments. I will make necessary adjustments to the syllabus (e.g., add an in-class exam, discussion, etc.). The final version of the syllabus—with the graded assignments—will be presented for your review and approval in the third class.

### *How do I begin to prepare for the group exercise on January 25?*

There are a series of steps you should go through to prepare yourself for the small group exercise.

1. Read the introductory chapter in the text and the reader to get a very general sense of the course concepts.
2. Think about what *types* of assignments you would like to have during the semester (e.g., exams, quizzes, short papers, graded group exercises, debates, group presentations, etc.) and make a rough list.
3. Consider the *content* of these assignments (e.g., If you want an exam do you prefer essay or multiple choice? If you have listed a paper, what will the topic be and how long will the paper be? Will it involve research?) ***Detail is important for this section of the assignment.***
4. Finally, consider the *timing* of the assignments you have developed. Look at the semester schedule, and think about the due dates for your other classes, midterms, etc. when you consider due dates for your assignments. Please note that the syllabus does not include any readings from the *Taking Sides* text. With a copy of this book, you should: 1) identify which readings are of greatest interest to you; and 2) consider whether you wish to include some sort of graded assignment using this text.

I have attached a copy of the class schedule that you can mark up with assignments along with an assignment planning sheet that you can use to express your preferences and list the *Taking Sides* issues in which you are most interested. Come to class with the assignment preference sheet completed so that you are prepared to discuss this information with your classmates.

### *What criteria should I use to create a list of assignments?*

Instructors typically use a number of criteria when they are creating a set of assignments for a class during the semester. The list below provides





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