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The Promising Syllabus

Perhaps reading my syllabi aloud on the first day of class seems boring because my syllabi are boring

By JAMES M. LANG

I've always considered the most boring 20 minutes of the semester to be the time I spend reading the syllabus on the first day of class. Students come in, potentially excited about getting started, only to end up listening to me read aloud.

I imagine them paraphrasing in their heads one of my favorite Woody Allen lines: Thanks, but I've been doing my own reading since about the first grade.

Still, the consensus among colleagues with whom I've shared this fear of boring my students—dullaphobia?—has been that reading the syllabus out loud remains a necessary act for reasons that seem vaguely legalistic. When a student who has plagiarized a paper gets zero points for the assignment, for example, and questions the fairness of it, you can remind him that the policy was read to him on the first day of class.

And it does seem important not only to ensure that the students have heard the syllabus, but also that I've taken the opportunity of reading it to elaborate on various points, providing a more in-depth preview of the course.

Still, it has occurred to me lately that perhaps reading my syllabi aloud seems boring because my syllabi are boring.

So how do you liven up a boring syllabus? Clip art? More jokes? Perhaps even just one joke?

A better method would be to adopt the idea of the "promising syllabus," a concept developed by Ken Bain, whose book (*What the Best College Teachers Do*, 2004) I recommended in last month's column on suggested readings for faculty members in higher education (*The Chronicle*, July 14). He is vice provost for instruction and the director of the Teaching and Learning Resource Center at Montclair State University.

Bain doesn't claim to have originated the idea of the promising syllabus — he discovered it, he said, from his review of the syllabi of outstanding college and university teachers, in which he found a common approach and some common features.

"The promising syllabus," Bain wrote to me via e-mail, "fundamentally recognizes that people will learn best and most deeply when they have a strong sense of control over their own education rather than feeling manipulated by someone else's demands."

Such a syllabus usually contains three components. First, it offers an explanation of the course's promise to the students: What will they have gained, in terms of knowledge or skills, by the end of the semester? The focus moves away from what the teacher will cover to what the student will take away from the course.

Second, it describes the activities in which the students will engage in order to help them fulfill that promise: the readings, the class activities, the assignments.

Third, and most interestingly, the promising syllabus "begins a conversation about how the teacher and the student would best come to understand the nature and progress of the student's learning."

"This section," Bain says, "is far more than grading policy (what percentage will it take to make an A), but the beginning of a conversation that should last throughout the term that will help students understand what it means to become an ◆A' thinker in a particular course or discipline, and what constitutes evidence that the student has achieved that kind of thinking."

What struck me most about that description was the idea that the syllabus only "begins" a conversation about how the student's progress will be measured in a course. My syllabus is usually a long and detailed affair, specifying the daily readings and assignments and grading standards for the entire semester. I design it. Students follow it. End of conversation, right?

After my exchange with Bain, I dug around a little more for ideas on syllabus construction, and discovered a gem of an article that illustrates perfectly how the syllabus can represent the beginning of a conversation — as opposed to my syllabus, which resembles the kind of one-sided "conversations" my dad used to have with me when I came in long after curfew.

Suzanne Hudd is an assistant professor of sociology at Quinnipiac University, and in a 2003 edition of the journal *Teaching Sociology*, she published an article entitled "Syllabus Under Construction: Involving Students in the Creation of Class Assignments."

In her introductory sociology courses, Hudd said, she begins the semester by handing the students a skeletal syllabus, which contains only the topics for each week, and the course readings. In that first class, she discusses with her students all of the components necessary for creating a set of assignments for a course — explaining different types of assignments, due dates, weighting, etc. — and then assigns them the task of developing a set of assignments for the course for the next class.

In the second class period, the students work first in small groups and then as a class to determine the work they'll be doing for the course. She distributes a draft of their new, collaboratively constructed syllabus in the third class, allows one more chance for final revisions, and then the syllabus is set and printed for the semester.

Radical as that exercise sounds, Hudd reports that "the vast majority of the assignments [that the students propose] are fairly traditional." Students generally don't argue to have their grades determined by, for example, by making collages or rock videos.

Students in the courses where she conducts that exercise typically earn slightly higher grades than in her other courses, a difference she attributes to the fact that "students who have collaborated in constructing their assignments become more personally invested in the course content and the evaluation of their performance."

More philosophically, she argues, "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."

Both of those conclusions seem sensible to me, and in line with the ideas of the promising syllabus outlined by Bain. I'll be the first to confess, though, that I would have difficulty using that exercise myself. Right or wrong, the idea of the syllabus floating without particulars until the second or third week of class would make me a little anxious. I like to see the semester plotted out a little more firmly than that.

(Hudd clarified for me recently that she feels the same way about her upper-level courses; she has only used the exercise in her introductory classes, where she finds "more wiggle-room for such openness.")

But I do very much like the idea of giving students some say in the determination of the work they will do, and perhaps a middle ground exists, a plan in which an instructor sets major assignments at the midterm and final periods, but allows students to construct intermediate assignments, and determine their weight. Alternately, an instructor might develop a list of potential assignments, and allow students to pick their poison.

On this, of course, as on everything related to teaching and learning in higher education, you'll find no right answer. As Bain points out, the right path "depends on the subject and the students."

In putting together the syllabus, Bain says, and possibly ceding some of your control of it to the students, you have to ask yourself the only question that really matters: "What will help them learn?"

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