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Special Summer Teaching Toolbox

A “Triple Pandemic” Syllabus

by Emily O. Gravett

Course syllabi have been variously called [contracts](#), [invitations and promises](#), [FAQs](#), [instructional roadmaps and operator's manuals](#), [instruments of cruelty](#), [stories](#), [comic books](#), and, my personal favorite, [CYA documents](#). They are also one of the first—if not the first—forms of communication between us and our students. They’re important. Obviously, this fall, we’ll want to continue to be clear with our students about our learning outcomes, assignments and deadlines, attendance policies, disability accommodations, and all of the other information listed on [JMU’s Syllabi Requirements website](#).

Yet it occurs to me that our syllabi may need some adjustments as we teach amid what many folks are experiencing as a [“triple pandemic.”](#) What additional information should we include to respond to this novel situation and to clarify our teaching and student learning in the midst of it? On the listserv for folks like us in the CFI (the POD Network), professionals have been busy brainstorming what else we might want to be especially clear/direct about on our syllabus right now. I asked our friends in the Libraries too. Our ideas, so far, include:

- Format/modality of the course (i.e., is it in-person? hybrid? online? if online, is it asynchronous? synchronous?)
- When precisely the class meets, in person and/or online (this may get complicated in larger or over-capacity classes, as some of the students may be working remotely while others are in class)
- Communication expectations (e.g., how to best get in touch, how long to wait for replies)
- Technology requirements (including in-person classes, in the event of a re-pivot)
- How students can access course materials, especially if they don’t have reliable WiFi or personal devices
- Expectations around Personal Protective Equipment, disinfectants, and social distancing, if in person

- Expectations around treatment of housekeeping and facilities staff
- What students should do if they get sick or suspect they are sick
- Expectations around attendance, with special reference to course format/modality
- Expectations around participation, engagement, and/or contributions, which may supplement or even supplant an “attendance policy,” depending on the course format/modality
- Community guidelines/rules of engagement for synchronous online or in-person interactions (which, of course, you can always co-create with your students, as I do myself)
- Where and how office hours will be held
- What will happen in the class if the university moves online again
- Instructor back-up/buddy contact information
- What else?

I’m thinking you’ll find even more things to add as you create your classes—or your students may be able to guide you, for example, in response to a pre-semester survey or questionnaire. Now, of course, the risk here is that our syllabi all become 20-page-long rulebooks that CYA, but that students hate to read and that set a bad tone for the semester. As a way to shorten the syllabus, much of this information could also be conveyed in separate documents or, if on Canvas, separate pages, so long as it is clear and obvious where to find it.

In a way, all of these considerations are just an (albeit, in some cases, extreme) extension of what I’ve written about [elsewhere](#): learning-centered syllabi. [As Kevin Gannon writes](#), the recurring theme across effective syllabi is “putting student learning (not institutional policy) at the heart of the syllabus.” How can students contact us? What technology is required? What happens if we need to pivot online, again? These are all, essentially, questions about how we intend to center student learning and support student success, not through an ever-growing list of [“thou shalt nots,”](#) but through a sort of version of [transparency](#).

I also imagine, now more than ever, syllabi that are [“warm,”](#) caring, friendly, welcoming, supportive, and approachable will be helpful—even reassuring—to students who may be coming to college with all sorts of [trauma](#). (This is one way we can enact a [“pedagogy of care”](#).) It helps if the syllabus is not simply a list of impersonally or punitively formulated information; consider, instead, directly addressing students, acknowledging the stresses they may be experiencing and encouraging them to consult with you if anything interferes with their learning. Express an empathetic understanding of the difficult nature of

this situation, a willingness to be flexible and responsive, and a commitment to their success in spite of everything. We're all going to be in it together, that's for sure.

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