Engaging Students with the Syllabus

by Daisy Breneman and Andreas Broscheid

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So, we've all gotten emails (many, many emails) from students asking questions that are answered in the syllabus. Our response is sometimes amusement, sometimes annoyance, sometimes understanding: Why don't students read the syllabus? Why don't they remember what we put in the syllabus? Why do they still ask questions instead of checking what the syllabus said? As we all try to ease into yet another pandemic semester by working on our syllabi, this toolbox doesn't have magical answers or solutions; but, we do hope to offer some ideas and strategies here for getting students to engage with the syllabus.

Maybe the first question to ask is: is the syllabus something WE engage with? Sure, we've written it at some point (though that writing process may have made heavy use of Ctrl-C, Ctrl-V). But do WE remember what's actually in the syllabus? (Andreas here: I do not always remember, and sometimes students remind me of things I put in my own syllabus.) Is the syllabus even worth reading? Kevin Gannon, educational developer, historian, and JMU alum, makes this point in response to a viral story about an instructor who included instructions in his syllabus for how students could find $50—which all students overlooked. Gannon notes that syllabi are often the terms and conditions we all have to accept for a course, "boilerplate" text that's required for reasons of accreditation and university policy, but mostly of little real-life interest to both students and faculty.

So, what would a syllabus look like that's of interest (and use) for us, and for the students? (Teaching Toolboxes have addressed some of these questions before; see Emily Gravett on The Learning-Focused Syllabus and, more recently, A "Triple Pandemic" Syllabus.) More than a legal or policy document, a syllabus can be an "invitation, map, and guide," the start of a relationship and adventure. What purpose should our syllabus pursue? And what do the students want (or need) from the syllabus? Co-creating a syllabus with students can be an important way to promote student engagement and ownership of their learning and can take a wide range of forms.

Daisy, for example, develops some course objectives and outcomes with students. In a Canvas discussion board assignment, students articulate not only how they will work toward those goals, but what their instructors and peers can do to best support their learning; these conversations could also take place through an online poll, in class, on a Google Doc or Jamboard, or some combination. Co-creating goals offers not only a launching point, but also a place to revisit and reflect upon throughout the semester, including at crucial points such as the midterm and the end of the semester. Andreas also has done a version of syllabus co-creation in the past by asking students to create elements of the syllabus: formulate and select learning objectives, for example,

or make decisions on important course policies. While this can be done through in-class group work, a great (according to Andreas, who came up with it, go figure) first writing assignment is for students to write a short 1-2 paragraph introduction for their own syllabus.

Building on the purpose of the syllabus, we can also ask what syllabus *format* would be most effective for achieving that purpose. On Twitter, faculty from JMU and other institutions recently exchanged examples of graphically interesting syllabi that engage students by changing the text-only character of syllabi (and discussed syllabus annotation—more on that topic below). They continue work by people like Tona Hangen, Lynda Barry, and others. One of the drawbacks of visual syllabi, though, is that it may be impossible, difficult, or a lot of work to make the syllabi accessible to students who use screen readers. To solve this problem, Andreas has in the past provided graphic and text-only versions of his syllabi.

But maybe there are other ways, besides graphic design, to make syllabi more interesting to students. Raul Pacheco-Vega, for example, suggests storytelling as an approach to syllabus writing. Emily Gravett offers excellent advice on creating a warm syllabus. In a similar vein, Andreas has recently focused on text-based syllabi whose tone is more narrative and casual (instead of a section on rules and policies, for example, he uses a list of FAQs that include course and university policies, with links, including to the official JMU syllabus page). Shifting to a "tips for success" or "advice" framework can also empower students, so, for example, instead of dictating "you must attend class," an instructor can explain the benefits and importance of class attendance. (Or, instead of mandating "no technology," and delineating the various punishments, including but not limited to the guillotine, that will result when a phone is spotted, the syllabus can launch a discussion of responsible technology use to benefit learning.)

Besides creating syllabi that students may want to read, we can engage students in class activities about syllabi, including critiquing the syllabus. The type of critique can be adapted to a variety of disciplines and contexts. In Daisy's Disability and Justice course, students conduct an accessibility audit–that is, a review of the syllabus to identify features that reflect universal design, inclusion, and accessibility, as well as ones that could pose barriers to learning. Some statements or features are both; as an example, students have recognized that community service learning is engaging, but can also pose barriers for some marginalized students. This opens a conversation about universal design as an ongoing conversation and goal, not a destination or final product. Students can offer suggestions for revisions, such as more flexible deadlines, options for learning activities, and alternative formats for course materials. Of course, not everything is up for grabs; for example, if a student asks for different office hours, we can remind them we also have lives, other obligations, and limits to availability. We can be honest about our own needs, boundaries, and expertise.

Another activity to engage students with the syllabus is to annotate the syllabus together with the students. There are several tools, such as hypothes.is, one can use for collaborative annotation activities. Andreas simply creates his syllabus as a Google doc that he shares with the students,

inviting them to leave and respond to comments in the document. As [Remi Kalir and Maha Bali discuss here](#), it is important to "seed" the annotation activity with comments and questions that students can respond to, in addition to leaving their "original" comments. That way, we can make sure students pay attention to portions of the syllabus that we definitely want them to read. This activity can also be combined with Daisy's syllabus audit in that students can critique and suggest changes to the syllabus as they annotate it.

Some other ideas for increasing engagement with the syllabus might include:

- [A syllabus quiz](#) or other activity that requires students to have read the syllabus to complete; for example, they could identify what they believe is the most important information in the syllabus or ask a question about the syllabus content.
- An ["easter egg"](#)—for example, including in the syllabus an activity for students to complete; this can also be a fun thing—Daisy's syllabi often ask students to submit to Canvas a picture of an [adorable animal](#), beautiful beach, or something else that can bring smiles at the start of the semester. Framing the activity in the spirit of invitation and fun can help avoid the risk of seeming mocking or "dickish" (as Gannon's Twitter response notes). The activity could also be tied to actual course content; for example, an English course could ask students to post a picture of their favorite book.
- An actual contract that students sign, indicating they've read and agree to the syllabus.
- *Returning* to the syllabus throughout the semester. Students will forget about it if we don't bring it up frequently. We can use the agreed-upon guidelines, assignments, learning outcomes, and other items as "checkpoints" throughout the semester. This is a good way to build in accountability and help students reflect on their learning, as well as offer opportunities to adjust as needed.

Here, before the start of the semester, we encourage you to treat your syllabus as a living document: Take notes and brainstorm potential future changes for the next time you teach the class. Share it with colleagues and ask for feedback. We can learn a lot from each other. Consider having syllabus workshops within your department or other teaching circles. The syllabus can be a way to invite conversation and build community, in the classroom and beyond. Also, we encourage you to recognize [the limitations of syllabi](#) as learning tools. The syllabus is just a document—an important one, sure—but it's only a door into the [inclusive](#), meaningful learning community and experiences we hope to create for our students.

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