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If Your Syllabus Could Talk

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FIRST PERSON

Personal experiences on the job market

As an academic adviser and adjunct instructor at a large mid-Atlantic university, I am not quite sure how the arduous task of proofreading every syllabus within one of the largest colleges on the campus became my responsibility, but it did.

At first I was a bit overwhelmed (and perturbed). The English department alone had more than 200 syllabi to scour. Not to mention classics, criminal justice, all of the foreign languages, and most of the courses that end in -ology. My eyes began to

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But as I reviewed the syllabi, I began to see patterns and symbols. Suddenly I realized I had a unique window into academe. The project allowed me to get to know professors in the college without ever having to meet them or attend their classes. There was no need to do either to figure out what kind of a faculty member they were. Their syllabi said it all.

As faculty members and administrators, we often discuss the low expectations that our students have of themselves, of their work, and of higher education in general. Students often miss class or stroll in 20 minutes late, come unprepared, do not follow directions, and sometimes plagiarize their work. They complain about homework, papers, tests, books, reading, writing, speaking, and everything and anything that surrounds active learning.

Every semester, the faculty dreads this undergraduate apathy. Most of us would welcome utter contempt over the absolute indifference and malaise that we generally receive. We impugn students for their behavior, and consider ourselves above them in terms of thinking critically, meeting expectations, and following directions.

Little do we realize that we share some similar attributes. After reviewing about 400 syllabi, I was startled to find that the laziness, the inattention to direction and detail, and, most significant, the inability to proofread and use spellcheck are qualities possessed not only by students.

The university has policies on what a syllabus must include, and it is not difficult to adhere to the requirements. Those policies include simple things, like requiring professors to list their names, office hours, contact information, the course name and number, course objectives, the required texts and materials, the schedule of readings and assignments, and the grading and attendance policies. Those items seem so obvious you wouldn't think a university even needs to spell them out in formal policies.

Apparently, those requirements are so banal that many professors feel that they should be scratched altogether. I even found eight syllabi that didn't bother to include the professor's name.

One of my favorite examples of the minimalist approach to syllabus construction looked like this:

- Week 1: Chapter 1.
- Week 2: Chapter 2.
- Week 3: Chapter 3.
- Week 4: Chapter 4.

And so on, for 15 weeks. It was one page in length with no test dates, no contact information, nothing.

That syllabus, as scant as it was, speaks volumes about the professor who created it. Purely on a logistical level, he is obviously miles from meeting the university requirements. That tells me he feels above having to follow any kind of standardization. Of course, the same professor will probably be unbendingly demanding of his students, expecting a complete obedience from them that he himself refuses.

Worse, the professor is communicating a clear message to his students, and it says, Hands off. Through his syllabus, he is telling students that he will not baby them in his classroom, that he has the power to add whatever he chooses to the syllabus because it was never in writing in the first place, and that he is unapproachable, as his office phone number, e-mail address, and office hours are nowhere to be found on the syllabus.

Is this professor even remotely interested in teaching this class? Not judging from the syllabus. University professors know the deal: In order to have the forum in which to conduct their research, they must (sadly) educate young minds. I know it's a hard pill to swallow, but it is the reality. So why not take the opportunity to open students up to rare fields of study?

Not this professor. He has illustrated through his syllabus that he wants students in and out in 15 weeks. He will probably lecture for the entire class period, answer questions grudgingly, and give two exams all semester. There will be no extra credit, no class participation, and no make-ups. Period.

When I was an undergraduate, I was always afraid of a professor with a detailed syllabus. To me, the longer the syllabus, the more work I was going to have to do, and the more thorough the professor was going to be.

That isn't always true. But after proofreading so many syllabi, I have concluded that the professors with the most detailed syllabi sometimes did require the most work but were also the ones who seemed most approachable and helpful.

Surprisingly, I did come across some examples of that rare, engaged instructor. I very much enjoyed reading one professor's syllabus, in particular, not only because it piqued my interest in the course, but also because it was a pleasure to finally see someone taking a genuine interest in the well-being of his students.

He began his syllabus with quotations from Sigmund Freud and William Gaddis that illustrated the general themes of the course. He followed that introduction with a lengthy course description, offering the relevance of his class to the students' immediate lives. Then, in full detail, he provided the topic and due date of every exam and writing assignment as well as the required page length, font, and margin size (also included in that section was the definition of an A paper).

What really brought a tear to my weary eyes was the following conclusion to his syllabus (yes, there was a conclusion):

Most important, please be assured that I want students to learn and to receive the good grades they deserve. So please make an appointment with me should you have undue difficulty with your work in the course.

Nice.

See, developing a creative and comprehensive syllabus is not about being a softy, about coddling students, or about trying to be the "cool" teacher who gets the good ratings on Ratemyprofessors.com. It's about being a human being, one who was also an undergraduate at some point.

It's about acknowledging a position of authority and, instead of being apathetic toward that position, using it to further the value and beauty of learning that we in academe claim to believe in so strongly. Pedagogically, and perhaps most important, it's about modeling the same behaviors that one expects from the students.

Some professors may argue that a syllabus can and should be changed, so it needs to be a somewhat flexible, vague document in order to leave room for a change in direction that may arise during the semester. Also, some professors now use their Web sites to deliver information to students in order to save paper and copying expenditures, thereby making the syllabus obsolete in many ways.

Certainly Web sites and educational technologies like Blackboard or WebCT have proven useful; but, ultimately, they do not eliminate the importance of a detailed, hard-copy syllabus that can be handed out on the first day of class.

The syllabus has often been seen as a contract between professor and students. Students look to it for answers: How do I get an A? How many classes can I miss before I fail the course? When are the tests and papers due? When is spring break?

Students want everything in writing; and, frankly, as an instructor, I put everything in writing simply to prevent the "I didn't know" phenomenon. ("I didn't know about the final paper." "I didn't know about the attendance policy." "I didn't know I couldn't sleep in your class.")

The syllabus doesn't just function as a contract between teacher and student, however. In proofreading syllabi of varying types and quality, I also found that the syllabus functions as an indicator. Students can deduce how a class is going to shape up simply from the elements of the syllabus itself.

For example, if a professor's grading policy puts a heavy emphasis on class participation, group work, or written assignments, then that professor probably wants students to be creative, to engage in dialogue, and to interpret texts freely. If the grading system is simply an average of two or three test scores, with no emphasis on participation or interactivity, then one can assume that professor would almost rather the students not show up for class and get the notes from a friend.

When I teach English courses, I always remind my students that every text has an author and is reflective of that author's personal biases and social milieu. I also tell them that everything in this world is a text, open to interpretation and analysis. A syllabus, like any other text, cannot be separated from its author; nor is it above scrutiny and deconstruction.

Professors, as critical thinkers themselves, should be aware that their syllabi are alive, symbolic, and vocal. A syllabus really can talk, and it's saying a lot more than we think.

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