March 14, 2008

The Syllabus Becomes a Repository of Legalese

By PAULA WASLEY

As dos and don'ts get added, some professors cry 'enough'

The syllabus for a course on American literature at the University of South Alabama seems pretty routine at first glance. It includes among its required readings, for instance, The Great Gatsby and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

But near the bottom of Page 3 is something not related to course work — a detailed clause on classroom behavior: "Students are expected to arrive on time, not to leave early, not to wear caps inside the classroom, and to follow traditions of decorum and civility."

Course syllabi have long been as varied as the instructors who composed them. Indeed, many faculty members are loath to share them, for fear of intellectual theft.

But increasingly the contemporary syllabus is becoming more like a legal document, full of all manner of exhortations, proscriptions, and enunciations of class and institutional policy — often in minute detail that seems more appropriate for a courtroom than a classroom.

Take, for example, the injunction that appeared recently on an introductory-religion syllabus at Wartburg College: "Keep your e-mail 'inbox' tidy so that you may receive timely notices from your professor."

Such clauses have cropped up on college syllabi around the country for a variety of reasons. Some have been required by the college or university. Since the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act, a statement about students with disabilities has become de rigueur. This fall the University of Missouri at Columbia added a statement on "intellectual pluralism" to its syllabi. Some institutions require the inclusion of an inclement-weather policy.

Heading off conflict is another goal. Faculty members concerned about campus violence add codicils to their syllabi declaring their commitment to a "safe and supportive learning environment"; others include disclaimers about potentially controversial films and readings.

With its ever-lengthening number of contingency clauses,
disclaimers, and provisos, the college syllabus can bear as much resemblance to a prenuptial agreement as it does to an expression of intellectual enterprise. But experts say that when things go wrong in the classroom, fuzzy expectations are almost always to blame.

"Our own experiences suggest that when trouble arises in a class, the conflict often began, in some way, with the syllabus," wrote Joseph Kenneth Matejka and Lance B. Kurke in a 1994 article on the syllabus for the journal College Teaching.

"You wouldn't think it was that important," says Mr. Matejka, a professor of leadership and change management at Duquesne University's Graduate School of Business. Still, he says, research indicates that the syllabus is "the single biggest determining variable in determining the success and reaction to the course." The well-designed syllabus, he notes, lays out right from the start the goals, requirements, and operating principles of the course.

Some teaching experts applaud the thoroughness as a coup for student learning. The comprehensive syllabus, they say, simultaneously protects the professor and prepares students for the demands of the course. Other experts contend that documents bloated with legalese and laundry lists of dos and don'ts have turned the teacher-student relationship into an adversarial one.

Making a List

In earlier times, the syllabus was a different beast.

The earliest examples of the genre were no more than (occasionally lengthy) lists of subjects and ideas to be included in a course, says Jeffrey A. Snyder, a New York University doctoral student studying the history of higher education who combed through syllabi in Harvard University's archives.

Among those he discovered in a research project for Harvard's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning was an 1870 syllabus by Henry Adams, a lengthy outline of 298 topics he wished to cover in a course on medieval political history. At number 26 on the list was "Scandal in regard to the bishopric of Merseburg." Adams had no strictures on eating during class.

While many of today's syllabi still retain that listlike quality, the modern format of assigned readings and term-paper due dates did not fully emerge until the early part of the 20th century. And even then, its use was limited by the technology available for distribution, says Christopher J. Lucas, a professor of higher education at the University of Arkansas.

The advent of photocopiers in the 1960s made putting syllabi together much easier. And the new technology coincided with a
vigorous educational movement that turned a microscope on all things pedagogical. By the 1980s, teaching theorists even began to posit that the lowly syllabus was no mere list, but a powerful tool for teachers.

Not Really a Contract

But the new teaching functions assumed by the syllabus over the last few decades have not overshadowed its role as an implied student-teacher contract.

In fact, the notion of the syllabus as a contract has grown ever more literal, down to a proliferation of fine print and demands by some professors that students must sign and attest that they have read and understood. This trend has led to increasing confusion on many campuses as to where the syllabus-as-contract metaphor ends and liability begins — including faculty members' fears that classroom decisions may land them in the courtroom.

The emergence of legal language in syllabi reflects a growing litigiousness in higher education over all, says Jonathan R. Alger, general counsel at Rutgers University and former counsel to the national office of the American Association of University Professors.

But Mr. Alger says the spread of such language to course syllabi may not be all that effective, legally speaking. While the idea that a college or university has contractual obligations to students has steadily gained ground in the law, he observes, a course syllabus is unlikely to stand as an enforceable contract, particularly given the courts' historic deference to colleges in academic matters.

"That deference to educational judgment comes into play when you talk about syllabi because they are first and foremost educational documents that reflect an educational mission," says Mr. Alger.

Other college officials may encourage faculty members to load up their syllabi with policies that close every loophole, but Mr. Alger wonders whether this academic-cum-juridical trend may be a step in the wrong direction.

"It seems to me we don't want to get into a situation in higher education where every communication between a faculty member or between the school and student is perceived as a contract," he says.

Just the same, Mr. Alger recommends that when writing syllabi, professors use "flexible" language, avoid offering explicit guarantees, and never include anything that conflicts with institutional policies. Building in that flexibility is why many faculty members add disclaimers to their syllabi, stating that the professor reserves the right to change or deviate from the syllabus, and why
others eschew dates on their timetable of class sessions, lest they run into trouble for falling behind schedule.

Devilish Details

Among the select set that spends time pondering the college syllabi, many observers herald the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink document as a move forward for student-centered learning.

The more detailed, the better, says Linda S. Garavalia, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Missouri at Kansas City who has studied students' perceptions of syllabi. "Students tend to be anxious about what it is that's expected of them," she says.

Spelling out as comprehensively as possible what types of activities students will do in class, how they will be assessed, and how much each assignment counts toward a grade reduces that stress, she says, particularly for freshmen who aren't yet used to college protocol.

The syllabus is also a handy index to the professor's personality and priorities. "It says right upfront, These are the things that are important to me, and I'm going to work with you on x, y, and z, and if that's not important to you, maybe we shouldn't do this together this semester," says Ms. Garavalia.

Particularly important, she says, is the inclusion of well-thought-out policies on makeup exams, grading, and late assignments. That way, she says, "you're not asked every time a student comes to you to make an arbitrary decision."

Ms. Garavalia's own syllabi range from 10 to 20 pages and include examples of written assignments, along with policies on punctuality, participation, and classroom visitors, all framed as positively as possible, she says.

The syllabus, she says, is the students' guidebook to the semester. Even if they don't read it all, they find it helpful as a reference.

The Comprehensive Syllabus

Administrators, too, tend to favor a comprehensive syllabus, say many faculty members. If a student comes carping, the first thing a dean or ombudsman asks is whether there is a policy in the syllabus that covers the complaint.

"So the syllabus gets longer and longer each time students think up something new that you wouldn't necessarily want them doing," says Susan R. Boettcher, an assistant professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin.

More than a third of her nine-page syllabus for a course on the
Reformation is taken up by explanations of her policies on attendance, laptop usage, and how to round grades, and her availability to write letters of recommendation.

Her detailed policy on scholastic dishonesty includes a clause stating that "the rules of academic honesty also apply to extra credit." It was an addition that she made after a judicial board overturned her recommendation that a student fail her course for plagiarizing an extra-credit paper. Her syllabus had not explicitly stated that students could fail for cheating on extra-credit projects.

"I thought that was obvious," she says.

She also added a clause explaining the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, which protects the privacy of student records, after receiving harassing phone calls from a mother wanting to know about her son's performance in class. Her policy on cellphones is particularly stringent: At the fifth cellphone ring during the semester, everyone in the class loses 1 percent of their grades. Hearing a cellphone go off in class, she explains, "is like pushing Control-Delete on my brain." (So far she hasn't had to enforce the rule, proof, perhaps, that threats work.)

Next semester Ms. Boettcher plans to add an intellectual-property-rights clause to her syllabus that forbids students to videotape her class and post it on YouTube. Not that that has happened to her, she says, but it is a trend she would like to avoid. She has noticed a disturbing number of clandestine videos of professors on the Internet, and she is not keen on starring in one.

Ms. Boettcher isn't wholly pleased at this proliferation of prohibitions and policies. "I didn't get into this job to enforce rules," she says. But, she adds, laying out ground rules saves time on negotiating later. Also, she believes, they compel her to fulfill her teaching responsibilities to the small percentage of students who might fall by the wayside without them.

The Rule Maker

Defining the rules and sticking to them help prepare students for the adult and professional responsibilities ahead of them, says Eric L. Peters, an associate professor of ecology and environmental science at Chicago State University. So his tactic is to lay down the law at the very beginning, through a tough and comprehensive syllabus, and then to ease up as the semester gets going.

"This is as nasty as I get," he says of his syllabus, which highlights particularly important dicta with bold type, capital letters, underlining, and exclamation points. "I can always be nicer."

With a large teaching load, he says, he cannot afford to deal with
problems and assignments ad hoc. So his syllabus, and a lengthy accompanying makeup policy, covers a number of elaborate scenarios instructing students what to do should they get sick, need to miss an exam, or drop the course.

If a student's car breaks down on the way to an exam, for instance, the student can consult the syllabus and discover that he or she will need to produce a towing-and-repair receipt to schedule a makeup.

Mr. Peters is also one of a surprising number of faculty members who ask students who miss exams to attend a funeral to furnish a death certificate or funeral documentation. That may sound draconian, he says, but he has had his share of runarounds with students who proffer serial and suspiciously opportune tragedies.

The rules, he says, keep things fair for everyone and don't give an advantage to the whiniest, loudest, or most dishonest students. He tries to make himself as approachable as possible, he says, "but at some point you have to lay down some boundaries or nothing ever gets done."

Without a Net

Mano Singham, an adjunct associate professor of physics and director of Case Western Reserve University's Center for Innovative Teaching and Education, is sympathetic to the phenomenon of syllabus creep and the frustrations that drive it. He has fallen victim to it himself. Over the years, he says, he watched his two-page syllabus grow to six rule-filled pages that tried to legislate for every eventuality. It started with the students' questions — first about due dates, then about required paper length, then fonts and margins.

"Each time students ask these things, I think, 'If I put it in my syllabus, then they won't ask me next year,'" he says. Eventually he realized that he had produced a watertight document that eliminated any ambiguities in the classroom.

Unfortunately, he says, it also eliminated learning. However well-intentioned it may be, says Mr. Singham, the creeping legalistic syllabus turns the classroom into a quasi courtroom, with students and professors on opposing sides. Its schema of rules and penalties assumes that students aren't to be trusted, are unwilling to work, and expect only good grades, he says, and sends the message that "basically this is a kind of prison."

As an experiment, Mr. Singham several years ago took the drastic measure of scrapping his syllabus altogether. It has worked for him. Now, at the beginning of each semester, he comes to his seminar with only a tentative timeline of readings and written assignments. The rest he leaves up to the students. Throughout the semester, he
asks them to decide collectively on when papers will be due, how they will be assessed, and what constitutes a good paper or meaningful participation.

This back-and-forth, he says, produced a profound shift in students' attitudes. He found that the more he delegated the rule-setting and decision making to them, the more engaged they became. They arrived to class on time, didn't quibble over grades, and were conscientious about turning in work, even without strict deadlines or penalties.

Best of all was the sense that they did all this because they were interested, rather than because he was making them.

Mr. Singham acknowledges that this approach, which he described in an essay titled "Death to the Syllabus!" in a 2007 issue of the journal Liberal Education, while well-suited to his seminar, may not go over quite so well in a larger classroom. Still, he urges faculty members to abandon their legalistic syllabi and "change the mind-set that looks on students as adversaries thwarted in their devious attempts at getting something for nothing." Fewer rules, he says, leaves more room for trust, communication, and enthusiasm for learning.

Letting Go

Other professors are swimming against the tide of the overgrown and heavy-handed syllabus.

After hearing of a faculty member who devised a syllabus for only the first six weeks of his course and then let students set the agenda for the second half, Sharon Rubin, a professor of American studies at Ramapo College, decided her own syllabus could use a revamp.

"I don't want to think of my syllabus as a contract," says Ms. Rubin, who wanted it to reflect her bond with students. "We're not on two sides of the contract; we're on the same side."

Ms. Rubin decided to strip out all the legalese that had accumulated over the years. She removed her policy on cellphones and deleted her zero-tolerance rule on late papers. "And the world did not crumble," she says. In fact, she says, the change prompted more fruitful conversations with students than she would have had if she had kept the blanket policies on her syllabus.

"Ninety-five percent of the students will meet your expectations," says Ms. Rubin. "The other 5 percent, they won't live up to them no matter how many negative things you have on your syllabus. So why let them define the class for the class?"

http://chronicle.com Section: The Faculty Volume 54, Issue 27,
July 19, 2007

If Your Syllabus Could Talk

By Monica D’Antonio

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 redden, and I felt carpal tunnel setting in.

But as I reviewed the syllabi, I began to see patterns and symbols. Suddenly I realized I had a unique window into academia. 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. 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.

Monica D'Antonio is an academic adviser and adjunct faculty member in the English department at Temple University.
August 28, 2006

The Promising Syllabus

By James M. Lang

I've always considered the most boring 20 minutes of the semester 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. He is vice provost for instruction and 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 contain 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 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, 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?"

Looking for Good Ideas

For the next few months in this column, I will take up the issue of how to encourage student participation in courses, and how to address some of the most common problems we encounter in the use of discussions and small groups in class. I would like to include the best ideas from The Chronicle's readership, so send your best techniques to my attention at careers@chronicle.com.

James M. Lang is an associate professor of English at Assumption College and author of Life on the Tenure Track: Lessons from the First Year (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). He writes about teaching in higher education and welcomes reader mail directed to his attention at careers@chronicle.com

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.
The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St. N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037
March 14, 2008

Research Yields Tips on Crafting Better Syllabi

By PAULA WASLEY

Many professors don't give much thought to what students take away from their syllabi. If that's the case, you may want to borrow a page or two from a few researchers who have formally pondered the question:

Watch Your Language

How you frame assignments and requirements on your syllabus can make a world of difference in how students perceive you, says John T. Ishiyama, a professor of political science at Truman State University.

In 2000, Mr. Ishiyama and Stephen Hartlaub, an associate professor of political science at Frostburg State University, compared undergraduates' responses to two hypothetical syllabi for a course on American government, and published the results in the journal PS: Political Science & Politics.

While the requirements on both were identical, one syllabus phrased them in negative or "punishing" terms, and the other in positive or "rewarding" terms. For instance, one syllabus told students who did not seek advance permission to miss an examination or due date that they would be "graded down 20%." The other syllabus stated that students who did not seek permission would only be "eligible for 80% of the total points."

While students appraised both classes as having a similar level of difficulty, they said they would be significantly less comfortable approaching the author of the "punishing" syllabus.

"We all know perception is a big part of learning," says Mr. Ishiyama. If students peg you as either approachable or intimidating from the start, he says, "usually it's a self-fulfilling prophesy."

Assert Your Authority

"Probably no other contract we will ever encounter is drafted with so little attention paid to the language," says Diann L. Baecker, an associate professor of languages and literature at Virginia State University.
Ms. Baecker examined pronoun use on syllabi for clues to how faculty members navigate issues of power and authority in the classroom, for a 1998 study in the journal College Teaching.

Her tallies revealed that "you" was the most commonly used pronoun (accounting for 55 percent to 82 percent of the pronoun usage on the sample syllabi). "I"s were relatively absent, composing only 9 percent to 38 percent of the pronouns.

More interesting, perhaps, was the lengths to which many instructors went to avoid using any pronouns at all in their syllabi. "There’s no mention of who’s calculating the grade," says Ms. Baecker.

In her own syllabi, Ms. Baecker lays it all out in "You" and "I" sections that enumerate the specific responsibilities of each pronominal party. "I think it gives you a more honest classroom where the responsibilities are clear," she says.

Don’t Forget the Date

It’s more important than you think, says Jay Parkes, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of New Mexico. Among the syllabus’s primary functions, he notes, is as a permanent record within and across an institution.

Accreditation boards often review syllabi to verify that programs meet standard requirements; colleges consult them to determine the number of credits acquired when a student transfers from one institution to another.

When a faculty member leaves or stops teaching a class, his syllabus is often the only document his successor inherits. And, the syllabus — the kind with dates — serves as a record of personal and pedagogical development.

"I teach the same courses all the time, but they change," says Mr. Parkes. "If my syllabi aren’t dated, I can’t track the progress let alone anyone else who needs to."

Yet, when Mr. Parkes, Tracy K. Fix, a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico, and Mary B. Harris, an emerita professor of educational psychology at the University of New Mexico, conducted a survey of 200 syllabi for a 2003 study in the Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, they noticed that 42 percent did not mention when the class was held, and 81 percent neglected to mention how many credit hours students would receive.

Know Your Audience

You may think students don’t read, or even keep, your syllabi. You’d be only half right, according to Angela H. Becker and Sharon K.
Calhoon, associate professors of psychology at Indiana University at Kokomo.

In a 1999 study, published in Teaching of Psychology, Ms. Becker and Ms. Calhoon looked at how students actually use the syllabus. They found that students attended most to items like grading policies and the dates of tests and quizzes on syllabi, and paid relatively little attention to academic-dishonesty policies, textbook information, and basic course information like the course number, date, and credit hours. (Sorry, Mr. Parkes.)

As the semester progressed, students took greater note of assignments, the readings covered in tests, and the schedule of topics, but showed even less interest in the syllabus’s policies on academic dishonesty and course drop dates — "all the things they should be paying attention to at the end of the semester," points out Ms. Becker.

More recently, for a study published in January in the International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, the pair surveyed students in a 15-week general-psychology class about when and how frequently they used their syllabus. They started with the common faculty assumption that students would lose the syllabus, but in fact, they found that the majority held on to their copies through the second half of the semester.

Early in the semester, students reported that they looked at the syllabus just a few hours before class. After the six-week mark, however, there was more evidence of syllabus-assisted advance planning, with most students checking their syllabus a day before class.

"After midterm, they realized two hours before class is not a good time to find out if there is a quiz or what to read for class," says Ms. Becker.