

The Promising Syllabus

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The Promising Syllabus Question: Can a change in the syllabus stimulate deeper and more enthusiastic student learning? What kind of syllabus do highly effective teachers use?

We studied teachers who have enormous success in helping and encouraging their students to achieve remarkable learning and found that they usually produce a certain kind of syllabus. If the syllabus didn't exist and you wanted to invent one based on what we think we know about human motivation and learning, what kind of syllabus would you produce?

Answer: The same kind that highly successful teachers already use. How so?

Human beings tend to be naturally curious animals, but that love of learning can actually decrease with extrinsic motivators that appear to manipulate the learner. In short, we all like to control our own learning.

The problem, of course, is that professors usually control the questions that are raised and the material to be learned, and rightly so. But that leaves students with little sense of influence over their own education.

The typical syllabus accentuates this problem, emphasizing "requirements" and "assignments" that the professor has devised. Not surprisingly, working under such a syllabus even many good students become strategic learners, learning to follow orders and do what is necessary to make the grade but avoiding deeper learning.

We can begin to reconstruct the environment in which our students learn with a syllabus that makes promises rather than demands, inviting students to a deliciously provocative intellectual or artistic feast. Here's how.

Elements of A Promising Syllabus:

In addition to the standard information about the professor and TA's the syllabus as promises contains three elements.

I. The Promises

Example: In the 1970's and 80's, Former Senator William Proxmire awarded what he called the "Golden Fleece" Award, a sarcastic recognition of what he thought were projects that wasted public funds. Some of the recipients of this dubious honor were scientists whose studies appeared to the senator to be examinations of ridiculously small questions that had no value.

Was Senator Proxmire justified in his criticism? What do research scientists do? Why do they sometimes spend years studying extremely small questions? What kind of research takes place at this university? Is it worthwhile? Some projects funded with public dollars may be ridiculous, while other strange-sounding endeavors may actually have enormous value. How do you tell the difference?

In this course, you will have an opportunity to explore some of the exciting research being done on biological clocks. In the process, you will develop considerable insight into the nature of science and the research lives of scientists. You may or may not become a research scientist, but you may some day have to decide about funding for a research endeavor. This course will help you make those decisions wisely.

It will also help you understand more about how your own internal clock and the clocks that exist in every animal work. Why do college students often like to stay up late while their parents are "early to bed and early to rise" people? Why do people suffer from jet lag? How do we find out about how Biological Clocks work? How do scientists draw conclusions? How certain are those conclusions?

II. Ways to Fulfill Those Promises (formerly known as requirements and assignments but carefully avoiding the language of "requirements" and "assignments"). The activities appear to flow naturally from fulfilling the promises.

Example: To realize these promises you must take responsibility for your own learning and participate as an active learner. The best way to learn what scientists do is to spend some time with one.

We have arranged for each student to spend at least eight hours with a research scientist. That person will tutor you in the ways of science, explaining their project to you and helping you understand the process of science. At the end of your experience in the tutoring program, you will write a five-page paper about your experience. This

paper will help you to get more out of the experience and it will help us evaluate your learning, providing you with more accurate feedback.

During class lectures, we will provide you with more explicit information on how to write this paper. During class, we will also provide you with lectures on key concepts and information that will also help you learn.

Reading, Writing, and Thinking in the Course

To take charge of your own education, you must be willing to read. We will provide you with some reading material that you will read, analyze, and think about between each class. We will distribute this material to you electronically.

You will also pursue a topic of special interest to you and write a paper about that topic. The writing of the paper will help you refine your thinking and understanding. If you do not learn to communicate in words, you cannot formulate fully developed thoughts and will, instead, live by the vague impressions and emotions that often substitute for ideas.

By the end of the course, you should be able to (*insert here a brief list or description of the major learning objectives*).

(Note: The language is student centered, not instructor centered. It says, "You will learn ..." instead of explaining what the course or the instructor will cover.)

III. The beginning of a conversation about how the teacher and student will best come to understand the nature and progress of the students learning and thinking (formerly known as grading policy, but far more than that).

Example One:

"The final grade will assess each student's ability to draw and defend historical conclusions and to think historically. To evaluate your progress in reaching these goals (and to provide you with feedback on your learning), we will look at the following items: (*insert those items to be evaluated*).

Example Two:

"We want to help you think about and understand your own learning and thinking so that you can better take charge of that learning. By the end of the semester, you should be able to assess your own work and make an argument about where you are in your learning (remember, an argument is not just conclusions but evidence offered in support of conclusions).

Here are some guidelines for the self-assessment that will help you make that argument.

Purpose: I understand that the purpose of this activity is to assess my own learning. If successful, the reader will grasp explicitly what I have and have not learned in the way of thinking abilities. I will display critical thinking about my thinking. I will begin by stating the grade that I believe that I have the evidence to support. I will build a case for my grade using the criteria below and excerpts from my own work as support.

(Note: Ironically, a well-reasoned case for you to get a low grade may well justify you getting a higher grade, while a poorly-reasoned and weakly-supported case for getting a high grade will certainly guarantee a lower grade. The most impressive response will be an accurate assessment of your strengths and weaknesses leading to a well-substantiated conclusion).

Overall Course Goals and Objectives: The goal of the course is to develop thinking abilities and the knowledge and understanding that result from their use in the study of questions and issues. My areas of strength: I am best at the thinking abilities listed below. I will attach evidence from my work along with accompanying analysis and commentary.

My areas of weakness: I am weakest at the thinking abilities listed below. I will attach evidence from my work along with accompanying analysis and commentary. If the course grade is to be based on how well I develop thinking abilities and the knowledge and understanding that result from their use in answering questions, my grade should be a _____. Attached is a summary of the reasoning on which I base my judgment.

See Ken Bain (2004), "What the Best College Teachers Do," Harvard University Press, for more on creating a natural critical learning environment.