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Using Your Syllabus as a Learning Resource

We know students do not take it upon themselves to read the syllabus. Yet syllabus indifference still bewilders me after teaching for 25 years, given that my syllabi are conveniently available online and in hard copy, and are replete with information virtually assuring success with my courses.

Tired of asking students to "read the syllabus for that information," a number of years ago I decided to incorporate my syllabus into each class meeting as a learning resource. Three strategies have proven quite successful.

First, like most professors, my syllabi provide an index of recommended websites. These well-credentialed and pertinent resources would be largely ignored were I not to require an assignment. Therefore, throughout the semester I feature one or two websites from the index that correlate with each class session. During our second class, students sign up for a website per their interest in its topic area or convenient presentation date. Their assignment is to review their selected website, and to present a web tour relevant to the learning activities scheduled for class that day. The web tour presentations must include a brief overview of current research, interactive tools, FAQ's, and the like. The central purposes are to engage students in consulting reputable online resources, and to invite initial discussion about the session topics.

For example, when we discuss nutrition in a wellness class, students may provide a web tour of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics website or the National Dairy Council website. When we study immunology, students may offer a web tour of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases or the CDC. This assignment contributes to the course grade as "collegial contributions." At the very least, my students are introduced to more than 20 websites of which they would generally not be aware. These recommended websites also serve as resources for class projects, making it less likely that students will simply "Google" information and use whatever comes up first.

The second successful strategy for using my syllabus as a learning resource is to integrate its detailed daily agenda into each class meeting. Because I require students to bring the syllabus to every class, I begin each lesson with an announcement to consult page xx of the syllabus, and we preview the session together. This daily agenda is dually essential for traveling student athletes and those who miss class for other reasons. It clearly notes learning activities, links to resources housed in LearningStudio (our CMS), assignments, and reminders.

Third, I require students to use the assessment table embedded in my syllabus. This graphic provides an at-a-glance preview of each assignment that contributes to the final course grade, its learning outcomes, and our university's core values of Excellence, Community, Respect, Personal Development, Responsible Stewardship, and Integrity. Students can see specifics regarding assignment requirements, assessment, point value, and date due. While common in most syllabi, students often overlook assessment tables. Although I post grades to the CMS gradebook, I also require students to handwrite their grade into the assessment table after they have reviewed the graded assignment and its corresponding rubric. Chronicling their progress or lack thereof can be a great motivator for students.

The assessment table correlates with assignments, each featuring the following statement: "This assignment will provide the opportunity for you to demonstrate course outcomes xx and core value xx. It will contribute up to xx points towards your final grade." My syllabus features this statement: "Each assignment will be accompanied by a rubric. Students are expected to use rubrics to prepare each assignment, and as instructive feedback of their assessed work." Taken together, these notices help students to understand the alignment of course outcomes, see relevance in assignments, and take ownership of their learning. These statements are standard in every section's assignments and syllabus.

We are likely well versed in designing functional syllabi that invite students to understand our course framework, serve as a "contract" with students, and provide logistical information. We should also consult checklists provided by our centers for teaching excellence to be certain we have included requisite components in our syllabi. However, we fail to use the syllabus to its full potential if it does not guide students toward building skills and competencies essential in the course. Our syllabi themselves are a viable learning resource.

Reference:

Harvard University (2010). Function and Components of a Syllabus. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning.

Dr. Joanne M. Crossman is a professor of Education at Saint Leo University in Florida.

Dr. Joanne M. Crossman; Using Your Syllabus as a Learning Resource; Faculty Focus; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/using-syllabus-learning-resource/] June 30, 2014

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Transcending Disciplinary Boundaries: Conversations about Student Research Projects

ONE OF THE MOST enjoyable aspects of running a faculty development program on teaching is seeing first-hand how much our various disciplines intersect when it comes to teaching and learning. Whereas it can be hard, if not impossible, to speak about disciplinary research with colleagues outside our fields, the common teaching problems we face allow for readily understandable dialog, no matter how far apart the discussants' fields of expertise.

Two recent presentations by faculty in my program made this abundantly clear. Both concerned authentic research projects required of students in science fields, but the ostensible similarities ended there. The first entailed having graduate-level pharmacy students design a hypothesis-driven research project, something which only a minority of pharmacy programs require. The second took place within the context of a junior-level genetics laboratory for biology and biochemistry majors, where a multi-week experiment had students performing genetic sequencing on microorganisms.

I won't pretend to understand the technical details behind these projects, but as a historian who's published on undergraduates' first experiences with archival research, I was intrigued by the teaching and learning implications. The discussions following these presentations unveiled commonalities that one might not expect between such disparate fields, particularly the problems and opportunities that transcend our disciplinary boundaries. (Publications on these three projects by Burkholder, Myers, and Vaidean et al. are cited below.)

First, all of us were far more concerned with the process of the students' research than we were with the results. In this sense, we differed markedly from our students, who at least initially remained locked in a dualistic, "correct/incorrect answer" mindset. Genuine research is a messy process: experiments go awry, evidence doesn't fit or is unintelligible, and dead ends are a constant hazard. Our concerns as educators were not whether students ultimately produced some expected result because such a result often didn't exist. Rather, we were all primarily interested in how students grappled with challenges as they arose – especially whether they clung to preconceived but potentially unproductive notions of project success, or whether they embraced a new mindset allowing them to overcome the inevitable hurdles in their path. The notion of Ken Bain's "expectation failure" was applicable here, where students could not continue in their projects without first acknowledging that extant modes of understanding stood in their way.

Second, we all saw value in introducing students to what academics actually do. How do we know what we say we know? What are the limitations of what we can know? Answering such epistemological questions doesn't come so readily in the context of the usual sanitized research we often ask of our classes. And although the students ultimately saw real value in these projects, many concluded they had no desire to pursue research as a career path. Not that this is a bad thing: on the contrary, eliminating a line of work from consideration gives sharper focus to what genuinely interests students for their professional futures.

Finally, all of us agreed that getting our students involved in authentic research forced us to step back, to carefully examine, and to retool our classes for the challenges participants would face in the laboratory or archives. We needed to systematically deconstruct the steps that would go into such research, and to anticipate and prepare for the problems that would arise. We thus had to detach from our own levels of expertise and try to remember what a novice would know and feel as she or he entered the unfamiliar landscape of research. As Susan Ambrose et al. recently point out, "unpacking" and decomposing complex tasks can be especially challenging for experts, who perform research steps automatically and even oblivious to the difficulties faced by their students.

Perhaps inevitably, we overestimated the preliminary knowledge and skills of our students, requiring us both to be patient as the students developed these faculties (my biology colleague estimated her students take four times longer to do the necessary tasks than it takes her), and to help fill in the gaps as they arose. In my own case, having run archival projects for years now, I've gotten better at preparing my students for the job and can more readily empathize with the problems they run into. Yet, just as there is ambiguity and messiness in the students' projects, there are myriad challenges, some of them unforeseeable, that arise from requiring such work from novices. Just as process trumped results in our students' research, we all concluded that it's the process of constantly reassessing our roles and responsibilities that holds the most value to us as educators.

In pushing our students into authentic inquiry and discussing the results, none of us anticipated finding teaching and learning commonalities between our disciplines. But as we tell our own students: when you enter the unscripted realm of research, expect the unexpected.

References:

Susan Ambrose et al., How Learning Works: 7 Research Principles for Smart Teaching (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

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Peter Burkholder, "Getting Medieval on American History Research: A Method to Help Students Think Historically," The History Teacher 43/4 (2010), 545-562 (link).

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Georgeta Vaidean et al., "Student Scientific Inquiry in the Core Doctor of Pharmacy Curriculum: Critical Issues in Designing and Implementing a Student Research Program," Innovations in Pharmacy 4/4, Article 131 (2013), 16 pp. (link).

Dr. Pete Burkholder is an associate professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University, where he is also the founding chair of the faculty development committee on teaching.

Pete Burkholder, PhD, Teaching & Learning; Transcending Disciplinary Boundaries: Conversations about Student Research Projects; Faculty Focus; June 23, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/transcending-disciplinary-boundaries-conversations-student-research-projects/] June 30, 2014