

Empathetic Syllabi Review Exercise

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"Do you know how much this exam is worth?"

"I can't find any office hours listed for one of my classes—are there any?."

"What if I get sick and miss a few classes—will my grade be hurt?"

My answer was the same for all three questions—"I don't know." Even though these were my first-year seminar students asking these questions, they were looking at syllabi from their other courses, part of a syllabus review exercise I do each fall with first-time students.

Here's how it works: at the end of the first week, I ask students to bring in all of their syllabi from all of their courses that term, our seminar's syllabus included. I then ask them to read all of the syllabi carefully, and look for specific components that are important for them to know: items such as the name and location of the faculty member teaching the course, office hours, the attendance policy, the types of graded assignments, when assignments are due, how much of the total grade each assignment is worth, and guidelines for how to effectively participate in class discussion.

Usually at this point, students have grown anxious as they notice how the aggregate number of assignments has grown—15 papers or 18 exams, often more than a thousand pages of reading during the term. For some students, it all seems insurmountable. I ask them to plot these assignments on their term-long calendar—some do it electronically, others on the blank calendar I provide in class. Once they see that they have months to complete everything, their

anxiety decreases and their resolve increases. They acknowledge the need to focus their studying, manage their time well, start work early when possible, and seek out support services (including the faculty member) when needed.

This in-class exercise also includes concrete examples for a discussion about time management, study skills, where resources are on campus, and the importance of studying multiple times leading up to an exam and of drafting an essay more than once. We even talk about healthy eating and sleeping. They leave class that day with a term-long calendar of work to accomplish, knowledge of where they can get help, and self-awareness of what they'll need to focus on as the term unfolds.

I also ask them to identify something that was missing from the syllabus but would be helpful for them to know so they can succeed in the course. When I first did this exercise, I expected to hear comments about grading and its seeming arbitrariness.

But I didn't hear this. Instead, some students noted that for one of their classes, there were no office hours listed (not even "by appointment") and they were concerned that they wouldn't be able to get help from the faculty member. Other students found that they had three major exams as part of their grade, but the dates for those exams were not indicated on the syllabus. Still other students found their assignments and the date, but they couldn't find on the syllabus how much each assignment was worth as part of the total grade. Several students received syllabi that only covered the first two weeks of the course, the rest was TBD. For the students who found these omissions, this brought back their anxiety.

For some of the missing details, I could provide context. Some faculty, I tell them, don't identify the exam date because they want to be sure that students understand the material before they're tested on it. For other missing details, this exercise gave me the opportunity to help students understand why office hours are important and how to utilize them. I also was able to help students strategize how to get that information, starting with how to phrase a question in class to the faculty member. I remind them that if they had these questions about important, but missing details, it's highly likely their classmates did, too. And I help students realize that faculty make honest mistakes, including accidentally forgetting to include important information on their syllabi.

This syllabus review exercise has transformed my own syllabi. I now work through a checklist to make sure all these important details for a student-centered syllabus are there. I've rewritten some language in my syllabi—about class discussion or conduct, for example—to be more explicit and affirming. Student feedback has helped me clarify language to be more easily understood by students.

This syllabus review exercise also reinforces the message that reading a syllabus is a key part of each course; some students were surprised that their questions about a course were answered already in the syllabus. Faculty spend enormous amounts of time in putting a course together, thinking about assignments, deciding grading schemes, organizing the material. Reading a syllabus deliberately allows students to explore the craft of a course's

development. It also allows them to see the entirety of the academic term—the natural ebbs and flows of assignment due dates, the trajectory of readings, and the places where their syllabi intersect with other activities in their lives.

This exercise also empowers students to seek clarity and consistency for the sake of their own success, and to ask for transparency about the unwritten rules of being a college student. I've come to think about this syllabus exercise, and the continual work of refashioning my own syllabi in terms of empathy. Not a course on empathy, such as a psychology department may offer, but a syllabus built on empathy, acknowledging and regarding my students' experiences, thoughts, and feelings as they enter college for the first time.

Putting a syllabus together this way requires a shift in perspective and an understanding that a syllabus, like any text, has an audience. In this case, it's an audience with varying personal and educational experiences, and often differences in support networks. A syllabus built with empathy gives the details needed from the students' perspectives so that they can feel confident that they did not simply not gain entry to college but are welcomed members of a community of learners.

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