
THE SYLLABUS AS A SHARED NEGOTIATION

Matthew K. Gold. The Graduate Center, CUNY

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Syllabi change over the course of a semester--a syllabus almost never looks, on the last day of class, as it did on the first--but students are rarely invited into that process of transformation. Instead, even as faculty claim to create student-centered classrooms, they engage in what Paulo Freire has described as the "banking concept" of education by setting the structural terms by which the course will proceed, leaving students little space to advocate for their own interests. This is problematic considering that syllabi lay out a map for the semester, present expectations and requirements, define how students will be graded, and set the operational terms for the course.

What would it look like instead if, from the very first day of class, syllabi were consciously and purposefully designed with negotiation in mind? As Cathy Davidson, Brian Croxall, and others have proposed, we can begin our classes by sharing our power with our students rather than reinforcing our own pedagogical authority.

The process of negotiation can do more than improve the syllabus--it can bring students into a critical relationship with the course itself and acknowledge them as stakeholders in the learning process. This semester, while writing this piece (and realizing that I myself had never negotiated a syllabus with my students), I began my graduate class on "Knowledge Infrastructures" at the CUNY Graduate Center by handing out a draft of this essay and a draft syllabus. I explained my hopes for the course and my intentions in setting out the readings and assignments in the syllabus; I then engaged students in a discussion of the pros and cons of the syllabus as I had constructed it, asking them to point out topics and readings I had neglected to include. I copied the syllabus onto a Google doc and invited further concerns, questions, and feedback over the weeks ahead. The doc soon filled with suggestions--for instance, students argued that we should expand a unit on libraries to include libraries and archives, and also suggested that the course include greater discussion of knowledge infrastructures outside of the academy. As a result, we're including in our discussions social systems such as Twitter and Wikipedia. The resulting syllabus, finalized with student input, is undeniably stronger than the initial draft I had created on my own, thanks to the shared process of negotiation we undertook together.

While this is but one experiment, and one done at the graduate level, I am certain it can be replicated more widely. But in order to do so, faculty need to include students in the syllabus construction process and recognize their power to negotiate. Such pedagogical moves do not erase hierarchical structures, but they can make those structures more visible and encourage students to intervene in them.

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