# A SYLLABUS IS A CHANCE TO SHOW YOUR SOURCES

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### ARTICLE: A SYLLABUS IS A CHANCE TO SHOW YOUR SOURCES

A syllabus is a guide to where a course will go. It lists the texts that will be read, it presents details of assignments and exams, and it gestures to the corners of a field where the teacher will (and won't!) be taking discussions. In this sense, the syllabus is profoundly future-oriented. But I want to argue that you should re-orient your syllabus to the past—its own past—and use it as a chance to show your sources.

Every time I have designed a course, I have looked at syllabi from others, whether they were from a first-year writing course, a survey of American literature, or a seminar on digital humanities. Doing so gives me ideas for readings, assignments, and assessments, and this research saves me time, helps me avoid pitfalls or, at the very least, provides me a foil for my own take on a subject. As I go through the course design process, I also have productive conversations with colleagues. And yet for the first five years of my career when I passed out a syllabus to my students, I essentially presented it as an *ex nihilo* creation. There was no mention of the reading I had done, the conversations I had had, or those individuals who had inspired aspects of the course.

After one semester in which two of my students plagiarized, I found myself reflecting on how I could better model proper citation practices. My students were not going to encounter my academic writing, but they all had a copy of the syllabus. It occurred to me that if my syllabi were not exactly a case of stolen scholarship, I was at least missing a chance to more clearly demonstrate my praxis. For this reason, I began including "Acknowledgments" on each subsequent syllabus (see Croxall, "Course Details"). This section names and links to the work of individuals who influenced the initial design and subsequent evolution of the course. And while I am loathe to read through a syllabus on the first day of class, I always draw students' attention to this particular portion. I start by reading its first sentence, "Despite what you might think, professors don't know everything," and tell them that I think they should know whose work I have built on for the course. And while I have never had a student ask further questions about these acknowledgments, I can also say that I have not received a plagiarized assignment since (see Munroe).

Showing your syllabus's source material does more than model good scholarly writing practices. It makes visible the debt we owe to other teachers—teachers who, given academia's valuation of labor, have likely received little credit for creating their syllabi. Such acknowledgments could, as Katherine D. Harris argues,[1] act as a corollary to citation statistics in a promotion file, despite the fact that their inclusion would likely

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[1] I read Harris's blog post in the months after I had started considering this problem and begun to change my pedagogical practice (see Croxall, Comment). It's a wonderful coincidence that, eight years later, I'm writing this piece in a special issue that Harris is co-editing. In short, I'm pleased to have this chance to show my sources.

baffle reviewers.[2] Showing your past work on a syllabus, in other words, is a utopian and future-oriented argument that pedagogy and course design *is* scholarship.

## WORKS CITED

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[2] Tracking such citations of the afterlife of your syllabi would be difficult, but the use of a publishing platform like GitHub could significantly simplify such matters, as I have argued elsewhere (Croxall, "Forking Your Syllabus").