
SYLLABUS AS INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

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Last year, one of our students thanked us for a statement included in the course syllabus that read: "Regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, national origin, disability, veteran status, gender identity, or sexual orientation, you will be treated and respected as a human being." The student disclosed that her anxieties about the course dissolved after reading this statement. She reasoned that instructors who included such a statement would be "fair-minded and approachable" in matters of diversity, grading, and course communication. A course syllabus has the power to foster an inclusive classroom environment through carefully selected language and overt statements of inclusive policies, affirming that *everyone* is a welcome participant in the class.

A lack of inclusive language in syllabi may potentially exclude students even before class starts, while intentional, inclusive language reveals that students will be recognized as classroom citizens—active participants in communal learning—from the start. Failing to directly acknowledge inclusivity may suggest that individuality is irrelevant. Including language that exhibits awareness of difference is, perhaps, the least we can do to demonstrate appreciation for diversity in the classroom. An inclusive syllabus invites students who, historically, have been relegated to the role of passive consumers of syllabus language and policies, to express their identities and perspectives. Highlighting diversity can open, rather than close, lines of communication. Like the aforementioned student who expressed gratitude for the inclusive statement, individuals may become emboldened to request accommodations, express ideas about course dynamics, and actively engage in their learning. As the result of a single sentence in the syllabus, that student felt confident to embrace her transgender identity more openly in the class than she felt she could in other spaces.

Although some campuses dictate inclusive syllabus language by policy, many do not. This means faculty distribute thousands of syllabi each year that miss the opportunity to establish an inclusive tone, even though one inclusive statement can transform an individual's experience. While not a substitution for holistically inclusive teaching, the syllabus is an essential starting point. Instructors can make their syllabi more inclusive by affirming students' rights to share their pronouns, if they so choose, or by including information about resources for students experiencing difficulties (e.g. counseling services, the Title IX office, or campus food banks). Instructors might craft statements about accommodations for students as caretakers, invite students to communicate about religious obligations that conflict with course schedules, or simply write a statement of respect for diversity. If instructors cannot add new policies, they can still enhance inclusivity by proofreading for gender-neutral pronouns and unbiased language, as many syllabi, such as those in a recent study of STEM documents, promote a "gendered view of language and learning" (Parson, 2016). No approach to inclusion fits every course, but even one inclusive statement can empower

one student and, as a result, influence the class. Stated language on any of these topics communicates that the instructor is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. Inclusion begets inclusion.

WORKS CITED

Parson, L. (2016) "Are STEM syllabi gendered? A feminist critical discourse analysis." *The Qualitative Report*, 21:1, 102-116.