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Tonic for the Boring Syllabus

IT HAD HAPPENED before, sitting at the computer, working on a syllabus, again, fluctuating between excitement about a new course and a vague sense that life itself was being sucked out of me one sterile byte at a time. I was fighting boredom. And this was supposed to interest students? I tried to imagine it igniting their curiosity, but instead I saw them staring at it with the enthusiasm saved for the fine print on a life insurance policy. But they must read it. It is their life insurance policy for a future full of knowledge and wisdom! It defines how we're going to relate! As I sat there writing my syllabus I had a vision of the Ferris Bueller video of the professor droning on and on while asking for input: "Anyone? Anyone?" That was not where I wanted to go. I had to stop and rethink what I was doing.

The worst of it

The writing style of the standard syllabus is frequently flat, emotionless, and formulaic. It's made so in part by the list of things that faculty are required to put in the syllabus: contact information, learning objectives, course description, ADA and other policy information, etc. These policy guidelines are considered necessary for a variety of good reasons. Even so, I have yet to see a policy on syllabi that demands they bore the reader! Much like first impressions of individuals, the course description in the catalog and the syllabus are the "official" first impressions that a student will have of a course (though many now turn to RateMyProfessors.com for "real" course information). What kind of impression do they make?

The meta communication

The concept of meta-communication suggests that the form of the communication, its nonverbal elements, begin to define the teacher-student relationship. So what relationship do I want with my students? What kind of first impression am I interested in making through my syllabus?

I know that students will have some idea of the course based on its title. They will also have an image of a faculty member. They more than likely will project past educational experiences on the course and expect what they have experienced to continue. They don't arrive in my course as blank slates.

I want to inspire curiosity about my field. I'm passionate about it and want them to see that passion. I'm also a lifelong learner and don't want to hide that either. In fact, I'd like to encourage them to join me on that journey so that we can learn from each other. Hopefully they will know immediately that this is a unique course and that their participation will help make it so. I'd like them to see the immediate relevance of the course and get a sense that their perspective and experience matter. Those are the messages I want to convey in the syllabus, and here are some of the ways I've tried communicating them. It's still a work in progress.

Succinctly stated strategic syllabi suggestions

I start by trying to get their attention visually. If everyone else is using Times Roman 12 font, I use something different. It still has to be readable, but many of those other font options are. I include a picture of myself, usually a candid shot and a couple-of-sentences-long biography. I tend to go the route of my passion for the field, but I consider identifying favorite hobbies equally appropriate.

Sometimes I add photos of prominent individuals in the field. I usually include a photo or two of students interacting (no faces for identification) as a means of telling them that we will be actively engaging each other. Quotes (again I like those by notables in the field) are another way to add interest and pique curiosity. I can see using a quote from a student offering some reaction or assessment of the course—a kind of endorsement message.

Why not a question or two on the first page? What do you already know about (class title)? What do you hope to learn about ...? How will you use ...? The use of questions cues students that there will be interaction and that they are expected to engage. It also tells them that questions are OK. Students should be asking them.

Actions, including those taken by students, have consequences. I go to pains to phrase them positively. Some do threaten students with the loss of points for various behaviors, but I try to support students. Class participation is a positive, for instance. Research documents that engagement promotes learning, and I assume that students want to learn. I am trying to set a climate that tells them this is a positive journey, and we are taking the trip together. Wherever possible I will use the word "we," hoping to open the door for collaborative learning, with me as learner as well as their instructor.

In the end

I'm not proposing that we make our syllabi

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Labor Day (no classes) - September 3

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First Monday of the Month

September 3	March 4
October 1	April 1
November 5	May 6
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Advice for Teachers: Dare to Be Strict

FOR TWO DECADES I have taught 150- to 200-student sections of introductory financial management to majors in all business programs, plus business minors from diverse fields. Although the course has its fans—some even change their majors to finance each semester—many students find the material daunting, become distracted, and behave in ways that impede the learning of others along with their own. Distractions always have lurked in college classrooms; texters and Web surfers are merely the note passers and campus newspaper readers of the digital age.

My syllabus, therefore, stresses the expectation that those enrolled will attend class regularly, remain attentive, and refrain from conversing, napping, or doing things unrelated to what we are discussing. I am convinced that most students support these policies based on the many who have thanked me over the years for making classroom order a priority. They report that some instructors do not admonish disruptors, leaving frustrated victims to bear that awkward task themselves or suffer silently. It makes sense that serious students would endorse these guidelines. What might be surprising are examples of reactions from some of the offenders that I've confronted.

Three students, assigned to adjacent chairs by an alphabetical seating chart, chatted incessantly at the start of a new semester. When numerous polite warnings proved futile, I announced in class that we would be switching the trio to new seats. Two from the group were contrite when we spoke after class, but agitated "Larry" asserted loudly and repeatedly that I was "unprofessional" and had embarrassed him in front of friends. (He was unmoved by my response that he had embarrassed me by ignoring my requests.) After venting for several minutes, he left but returned next session and remained grudgingly cooperative for the rest of the course. Fast-forward four years: quiet and diligent "Lenny," Larry's lookalike sibling, was on my roster. Later, at a homecoming event, Larry spotted me; he shouted my name and bounded over with his hand extended as though we were long-lost pals. He talked

about his job and a recent promotion. I mentioned that his younger brother had been in my class. Larry explained, "Yeah, I told him to take your section; you don't put up with crap from people who are there to play around."

Intellectually capable "Matt" did not cause problems directly, but he seldom attended and was inattentive when present, content to waste opportunities and slide by with middling grades. Seeing him in the hallway, I would comment on his indifference. When he stopped by the office just before finals week, I thought he hoped to ask questions about what he'd missed. However, instead he was there to tell me "I really like how you handle the class." Suspecting it was a snow job to curry favor, I suggested he had no clue what I did because he was rarely in class. But he continued that, as an education major, he took notice of instructors' techniques. "Next year I'll have high school students, and I'll speak up like you do when they don't give their best effort. They need to hear that you want everyone to learn."

Finally, "Kerri" attended infrequently, submitted no homework, flunked tests, and ended the term with an F. When she enrolled next semester, I assumed that she had seen the light and would be responsible in her second attempt. But she skipped classes and badly failed the first exam. So I emailed: "Why are you treating my course like a joke again?" She meekly answered, "How do you even know who I am?" I wrote that I remembered talking with her the prior semester and was wondering why she was jeopardizing her degree with the same foolish approach. She replied, "I am sitting here crying. I did not realize that a teacher in a class that big would care about one person." Kerri changed into an exemplary student, with perfect attendance and solid B work from that point on. She has stayed in touch with me since graduating.

Even students who seem to disregard our directives can appreciate their intent. Indeed the evaders typically mean no grave harm, often just needing guidance and encouragement. And while calling out a violator never is pleasant, it is necessary

to bite visibly, at times, if our barks are to be heeded. Sustaining an environment conducive to learning is an obligation we owe to committed learners. Some strict rules designed to address specific concerns, applied impartially and consistently, can reward students' more productive inclinations and help us convey what experience tell us is required for academic success.

Dr. Joseph W. Trefzger is a finance professor at Illinois State University.

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Joseph W. Trefzger, PhD; Advice for Teachers: Dare to be Strict; Faculty Focus; August 27, 2018; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/advice-teachers-dare-strict/] August 31, 2018.

Syllabus

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into marketing materials. We need to describe course content accurately. We need to include the necessary policies. It is about balance and recognizing the meta messages the syllabus conveys about the course. It's our first attempt to establish those relationships with students that promote learning. My goal: I'm working to create a syllabus that puts life into the subject!

Ed Cunliff is a professor in the College of Education and Professional Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma.

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Ed Cunliff, PhD; Tonic for the Boring Syllabus; Faculty Focus; August 28, 2018; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/tonic-for-the-boring-syllabus/] August 31, 2018.