Syllabus Queries

We offer these questions as prompts as you construct a course that is as mindful and clear in its presentation as possible. Your syllabus is an important document that can be extremely helpful in signaling to students not only the exciting content of your course, but also your priorities, commitments, demands and trajectory through the semester.

For the best possible outcome for all, it is helpful to remind ourselves that not all students come into our courses with the same familiarity and competencies: students who are first generation or from under-resourced high schools may be challenged by our classes in ways that we may not anticipate. For many, the "watch and learn" or gentle hazing mode of getting up to speed is perilous and punishing beyond our knowing. For students with learning disabilities, clarity on due dates, support mechanisms and consequences is particularly helpful. That said, it is also useful to remember that tasks that relate to aspects of executive functioning--due dates, organization, adherence to policy, etc., while reassuring and grounding for many if not most of our students, can be precisely the most daunting aspects of our course, far beyond the challenge of difficult content or assignments.

While there is certainly variability in what we need to emphasize in each of our individual courses, please consider the following queries for what they may prompt in how you guide your students through your course. Though it is, of course, not likely that your syllabus will explicate all of the possible answers to these questions, it is hoped that the course itself would be able to address the challenges and opportunities that are referred to here.

- Do the **title and introduction** adequately describe what this course is about?

- Are my **learning goals** for the course clearly stated?   Will students know what they can expect to be able to know and do by the end of the course?

- Is there messaging about the **level of the course**, i.e., intro (often 100-level), vs. 200-level vs. seminar, that may be helpful and grounding? If there are commonly-held (and often erroneous) assumptions made about these "levels" (i.e., 100-level means "survey" or "easy"; 300-level means "hard"), is that made clear?

- Are any and all **designations or associations** for the course clearly explicated, as in:
    - Does this course count for a major, minor or GEC?
    - Is this course a W1, W2, or W3 and what are the writing expectations?
    - Is this course designated as S (Scientific Reasoning), L (Lab), or Q (Quantitative Reasoning), and how is that manifested in the course?
    - Is this course designated as CEL (Community Engaged Learning) and is the integration of this component well described?
    - Is this course designated as PW (Purposeful Work) and is that aspect described clearly and helpfully?

The **Purposeful Work Infusion Project** is a curricular initiative that seeks to bridge the gap between course content and "purposeful work," which may include careers, identity, meaning and purpose. All Purposeful Work Infusion courses include three elements: at least one reading assignment related to "purposeful work"; at least one reflective writing assignment on "purposeful work"; and at least the equivalent of one class session's discussion focused on bridging the gap between course content and "purposeful work."

Community-Engaged Learning courses are designed to encourage and equip students and faculty to integrate civic engagement and social responsibility into their academic work through hands-on collaborations with off-campus partners.

[NOTE: Purposeful Work Infusion and Community-Engaged Learning are not the same, although some classes include both components.]

- Have I addressed questions or concerns about:

    - Academic integrity?
    - Attendance?
    - Grading?
    - In-class comportment?
    - Courteous communication via email and expectations about response?
    - Classroom environment in which all feel respected and safe?
    - Support mechanisms?
    - Office Hours and Contact?
    - Disabilities and Accommodations?

- Does the language in my syllabus make **reference to personal identities** in a way that is as inclusive and affirming as possible, for example, avoiding using phrases such as 'he or she' or 's/he' that assume a gender binary, and being

sensitive and forthcoming about usage of politically-charged or stereotyped characterizations of certain populations?

- Is it clear when things are **scheduled and due** throughout the semester?

- Is it clear to students **what is most important** to me and to their success and how is this signaled (for example grading percentages, bonuses, penalties, learning goals that are underscored with more or less frequency)?

- Are my **expectations about students' level of technological savvy** and my assumptions about their competencies with various modalities and software programs clear (for example, familiarity with Excel, Word, file storage, calendaring, iMovie, etc.)?

- If **assignments** are explained in the syllabus, are they **clear**? Do you imagine students navigating to completion independently? If you expect they'll need help or additional resources, is that obvious? With regard to larger (often cumulative assignments such as research papers), have I scaffolded them so that the assignment might build rather than having an all or nothing, submit and run scenario for completion?

- Have I sequenced the **high and low stakes assignments** in an optimal fashion?

- Does the **trajectory** seem **reasonable** for the students and for me? Is the course feasible? Is the course challenging enough? (Students have increasingly reported willingness to be challenged more not less...)

- Where possible and desirable, are the types of assignments **sufficiently varied**?

- Are the readings, viewings and other assigned materials of the **right length**?

- Does this syllabus present a course that **encourages full participation**, i.e., are there populations less familiar with this pedagogy or content that might feel more or less included or confident?

- Does this syllabus signal a sensitivity to **overt and hidden costs** of various sorts, for example:
    - Cost of books
    - Cost of extra-materials
    - Required extra-class meetings or obligations that may oblige students to rearrange or refuse employment opportunities

- o   Ability to work exclusively with materials on reserve or not

- Have I considered what **additional resources** might be needed (i.e., tech support) and have I planned time into the syllabus accordingly?

- Have I layered in time for **reflection and assessment**?

- Have I thought about the **final stages** of the course and what is expected of both students and of me, for example: do I have an instrument for soliciting **their personal final evaluation** of their work in the course (not mine)?; are their and my expectations clear on the level of feedback on final work, given the absence of follow-up?--this being a case for scaffolding the assignment so that a lot of feedback occurs before the final submission.

- Does my syllabus respond well to the **critiques of my courses** from previous semesters (where appropriate)?

- Have I adequately engaged in multiple modes of presentation and assessment (where possible) and **anticipated the time** that will be necessary to attend to areas that are less familiar to me?

- Does the syllabus take into consideration to the extent possible, **high impact moments of the semester** (beginnings, breaks, holidays, midterms, endings)?

- Do I have a policy on **alternative or make-up assessments** and is it clear and feasible?

- Is the syllabus **available** in some version at all times (Lyceum)?

- Is my syllabus clear on **how students can reach out to me** in times of doubt or crisis?

- Do I have a mechanism or strategy for **knowing that they've actually read this syllabus** ("syllabus quiz," in-class references to specific points, interrogating students on *their* interpretation of what you've put forward...)