Syllabus Design

Jenn Polish

What would happen if we structured our syllabus to foreground accessibility, rather than tuck it away? If discussions about accessibility, broadly defined, occurred on day one, and therefore framed the way that students experienced our classrooms? Instead of proclaiming that “we are not therapists,” and therefore that we can’t touch dis/ability with a ten-foot pole, what would happen if instructors normalized dis/ability, because—whether we know it or not—dis/abilities are everywhere in our classrooms, anyway?

- Aesthetically, what kind of encounter does my syllabus offer my students? An outpouring of long text with little to no white space? Lots of white space? Gridded information or paragraph-style? Both? Are there images? Links? How are sections spatially arranged?
- Does the document invite students to edit it with their own input and needs? Does it explicitly ask students for feedback and call itself a draft? Is there a physical means by which students can publicly edit and/or comment on the document?
- What is the tone of my syllabus? Is there a lot of jargon? Am I writing in a conversational tone? Is it a letter? What do I want the tone to convey? How am I navigating my own authority and power dynamics within both the text and form of the document?
- What is the presentation format of the syllabus? Is it editable? Digital only? Print only? Multiple modes? How will changes to the syllabus be communicated to students?
- What types of learning styles and needs am I welcoming here? Which am I excluding? How can I open up the syllabus to welcome more ways of learning and engaging?
- What are my goals with this syllabus? Why do I have these goals? Which students might have or need different goals, or need to get there in a different way than the one I’m proscribing?
- Is this syllabus inviting or excluding for students with extreme anxiety? With depression? With difficulty focusing? With PTSD? With varying ranges of social needs and comforts? What specific pieces of the syllabus indicate these things? (Some of these specifics will be discussed at length in Chapter 4. For now, some starter specifics might be: Do I require in-person presentations to the class? Do I indicate/intend to call on students at random during class? Do I explicitly tell students they cannot eat or be on their phones during class? Am I coming off as shaming about things like absences and lateness?)
- What do I assume -- what is my rhetoric implying about my assumptions? -- when my student tells me they’re sick? How might an ethos of trusting students when they say they cannot complete something on time or simply do not come to class alter my assessment methods and the diversity of ways that I offer students to engage in coursework?
• What assumptions do I make -- what is my rhetoric implying about my assumptions and value-judgements? -- when a student sleeps in class? When a student is on their phone/computer in class? When a student gets up and leaves multiple times during class?

• Do my attendance and participation requirements (including lesson planning and course content) automatically exclude or alienate students for whom interacting in particular ways is extremely burdensome? Am I proactive, rather than reactive, about providing multiple modes of engagement with the course?

• What kind of space do I give issues of Accessibility in my syllabus? How do I define it and what burdens do I place on my students with dis/abilities to be able to access my course?

Content Selection

Even if our classrooms are the most accessible they can hope to be, both physically and intellectually, our desires to affirm our students and refuse to increase already intense structural burdens on students with mental dis/abilities are doomed to be empty if we do not, too, examine the content we teach. Do we expect classrooms full of largely low income students of color to identify with white middle class men in the texts we assign? Do we expect these students to aspire to create a certain kind of literature, to produce certain kinds of knowledges, to the exclusion of honing and challenging and enhancing the knowledges and expertises they already have? Content selection plays a huge role in helping make coursework engaging and rigorous for all students, especially those who are typically marginalized by canon texts and classroom requirements.

• What kinds of learning do I expect students to be able to do with this text? Are there students whose own expertise might conflict with my expectations?

• Can my learning goals with this text be accomplished through teaching texts that might be more engaging to students, more relevant to their lives? In what way is this specific text relevant to these specific students’ lives?

• What affective response do I expect this text to elicit in my students? Why do I expect that? Whose experiences and expertises might contradict my expectations?

• By holding this text up as an example of writing that my students should aspire to, what am I implying about students’ current language practices? Their potential? The value of their work and their bodyminds?

• Am I providing spaces for students to share their own readings with each other (both of their own creation, but also texts that they’ve found engaging in their own lives)? What are the expectations of that space? Is it woven into the deeper texture of the course? How?
• Am I assigning texts meant, for example, to be empowering for students of color, or texts meant to be educational for white audiences? Am I assigning texts that encourage critiques of “normality” on multiple levels in authorship, form, and function?

Assignment Design

We need assignments that are both open enough and specific enough to welcome students of as many different learning styles and emotional capacities as possible. Many students benefit from having the latitude to pick their own project topics or even formats; others (for example, students on the autism spectrum and/or students with anxiety dis/orders) may learn better when given more concrete instructions, so that they know exactly what is expected of them.

How do we strike that balance between freedom and constraint? Between giving students the independence to pursue what inspires them and learn in the way they need to, while also meeting particular learning goals, such that students feel guided and supported and stimulated?

• What influence do students have on assignment topics and formats? Is there a low-stakes place where they can sound off about their own views about the value/lack of value in an assignment? Have I paid attention to/asked what kinds of assignments tend to be most generative for this group of students?
• What are my reasons for choosing the assignment format I am requiring? How do these reasons mesh with my learning goals? With my students’ learning goals? Are there other formats/styles/guiding questions that can also encourage these learning goals?
• For each requirement of this assignment, are there multiple ways to get to that point creatively, aesthetically, intellectually, emotionally? What kind of experience do I want my students to have with this assignment?
• Am I encouraging and/or allowing students to work collaboratively? What am I implying, through my assignment structure, about the value of collaborative work?
• Are there multiple access points into the assignment? For example, if a student has difficulty following class discussions, are there other parts of the class they can draw from for help developing their assignment?
• Is the assignment integrated into the larger course, or is it just something students do at home? Will the assignment be integrated into the class dynamic even after it is completed and graded? How so? How will it be connected to previous assignments?
• Can students complete this assignment easily without internet access at home? On their phones? Using limited data plans? If not, are there clearly-presented alternatives and options for access presented as part of the assignment?
• Do students have the chance to discuss and brainstorm the assignment together and with you before they begin? In more than one communication format?
• What low-stakes scaffolding -- both in and outside of class -- is built into the assignment to help guide students along? How and when do they receive feedback from you and from other students?

Assessment Practices

This Spring, my syllabus featured language borrowed from my mentor and advisor Carmen Kynard, whose syllabus for African American Literacies, Rhetorics, and Resistance includes this description of her assessment practices: “[y]ou are not graded on the skills that you brought with you to the course, skills that are more representative of socioeconomic status [and experience with academic English] than knowledge.” This message resonated so strongly that one of my students, when writing their first paper, actually cited Carmen’s brilliant, ethically-infused words to help support their thinking on the racialization of language, power, and authority.

It’s important to recognize that we continually assess students: when they don’t raise their hands to speak; when they can’t attend class because they can’t get out of bed; when we make ableist assumptions about students’ “commitment” levels or “work ethics” because they sleep in class, come in later, submit assignments late, or miss the day of their presentation. And we assess students when their writing isn’t up to (white, middle-class, educationally privileged, neurotypical) “standard,” when they enter our classrooms with different assumptions about what it means to access, create, and share knowledge. In these assessments, we generally punish students who are dis/abled, and/or those whom the school and medical systems pathologize as such.

We assess students, too often negatively, instead of providing multiple entry points into our classroom from the beginning, and making it clear that students can participate in many different ways (for example, jotting notes and passing them to you after class instead of verbally partaking in a discussion). Opening up available forms of participation, presence, and expression in our classrooms makes it possible to positively assess students who are disadvantaged by traditional expectations of classroom participation.

So how do we do what Carmen Kynard suggests, and refuse to grade our students in a way that perpetuates structural inequities?

• How do students help shape the ways that they are assessed? What spaces are created for students to assess themselves? How can students share these self-assessments with you?
What agreements do you and the students have about the weight of these assessments (think: contract grading)?

- Are students penalized for factors beyond their control? Are students penalized by our assumptions about their intent when, for example, coming to class late or asking for a paper extension?
- Are students punished for being quiet? For being loud? For sitting in a certain way? For wearing a certain type of clothing? Certainly, none of this is explicit, but how do the ways that we shape our participation criteria target certain students while rewarding others?
- Are students rewarded for what they already know how to do coming into class, or are they rewarded for what they seem to learn in our own class? (Think about standardized, unmoving rubrics that reward “merit” here.)
- What is the process by which students can offer you feedback on your own performance and what they need from you during the course?
- Do you tell students -- both on the syllabus and with written and verbal reminders -- when their deadline to withdraw from the course without penalty is? Do you reach out to students who seem to be on the course for a grade lower than they’ve indicated that they want to figure out how they can get on track/if they’d like to take advantage of the option of withdrawing without penalty?
- What do I assume -- what is my rhetoric implying about my assumptions? -- when my student tells me they’re sick? How might an ethos of trusting students when they say they cannot complete something on time or simply do not come to class alter my assessment methods and the diversity of ways that I offer students to engage in coursework?
- What assumptions do I make -- what is my rhetoric implying about my assumptions and value-judgements? -- when a student sleeps in class? When a student is on their phone/computer in class? When a student gets up and leaves multiple times during class?
- Do my attendance and participation requirements (including lesson planning and course content) automatically exclude or alienate students for whom interacting in particular ways is extremely burdensome? Am I proactive, rather than reactive, about providing multiple modes of engagement with the course?
- Which of my assessment practices are required by my department or school? How can I be transparent with my students about these constraints?

Professional Life

As an institution, academia can be overtly hostile not only to students with dis/abilities, but also professors with dis/abilities. Expected to not only perform in the classroom — which requires a huge energy expenditure — but also online, in scholarly journals, at conferences, and at department meetings, instructors are additionally (and perhaps most problematically) expected to perform “collegiality.” (In fact, it’s a quality that can factor into hiring or promotion decisions.)
Like assessment, “collegiality” (Margaret Price reminds us) is a concept that is riddled with racist and ableist assumptions about what kinds of interactions are acceptable and which are not. So, how do we deal with this out in our academic lives? What helpful questions might we ask ourselves?

- What do I need to function best when I’m in front of a classroom? Do I need silence? For students to not be looking at their phones? To sit down? To pace with frequency to let out a rush of energy?
- How am I comfortable communicating these needs to students so that my boundaries are respected, but without making students feel as though they are pathologized?
  - For example, can you explain to students that you would strongly prefer them not to be on their phones during class (possibly because of your own OCD) because of your own learning styles instead of implying that they’re “bad students” if they feel the desire or need to check them? What compromises might you come to in this regard so that both your needs and student needs can be met?
- Do I prefer to offer students outside-of-class assistance during in-person office hour sessions? Or is it better for my mental health to host online office hours? Can I conference one-on-one with students when they have big projects due, or would I prefer to have more ongoing email interactions with them? How do my needs align with or counter student needs? What compromises can be made?
- What is my plan for the days when I am extremely low-energy, or extremely high-energy? What is my plan for the days when I simply cannot grade? What degree of transparency with my students is most conducive to a healthy classroom environment in this situation? Do I include in our class grading contract (if applicable) a note that sometimes I, like my students, will need understanding and latitude?
- If I don’t have the social stamina to network at or even attend conferences, are there organizations I can join, associated with conferences, where networking principally takes place online? (For example, the Writing Program Administration has a graduate student organization, WPA-GO, that largely engages in online collaboration.)