

How do I communicate my course so that students feel invited to take on the challenges of my discipline?

One of the most common ways we communicate our courses to our students is through the syllabus, which is not only students' first encounter with our course but may also be their first introduction to our discipline. Traditionally, the syllabus was designed to provide an outline of the content a course would cover and the assignments students would complete. This may be the kind of syllabus that many of us encountered most frequently when we were students. However, there is a different way to think about designing a syllabus: as a way of inviting students to the exciting work of our disciplines by motivating them to do the work of our courses. In their book *Designing a Motivating Syllabus*, Christine Harrington and Melissa Thomas argue that "When professors use the syllabus as a vehicle to share their passion for their discipline and their desire for students to be successful, students become much more excited about the course and learning new content and skills" (p. 1). Writing a syllabus that focuses on student learning can be more inviting because it shifts the focus to the kind of learning students will do in our course, how they will do that learning, and why that learning matters. This signals to students that our course is not just about the content, but it is also about learning and working with that content in ways that will meaningfully change them.

What does an inviting syllabus look like?

Principles to guide the design of an inviting syllabus

- Before we can write an inviting syllabus, we must design a course with a clear destination for students.
- Students will feel invited into the work of our discipline if the syllabus helps them see a path to success in our course.
- An inviting syllabus gives students responsibility for and control of their own learning.

Putting these principles into action

- **Begin the course design process by determining how you want your students to change by learning to think through the lens of your discipline.** Developing a traditional, content-centered course begins with choosing the content we will cover and deciding how we will organize that content over time (with some room for assignments and assessments along the way). When our course planning focuses on content in this way, there is no evident end point or destination for the course. Most importantly, we end up designing courses that simply expose students to a great deal of content without really helping them experience the excitement of the work of our disciplines. Designing an inviting, learning-centered course begins with setting the destination for our students: we must determine how we want our students to change by the end of (and as a result of!) our course. This means

articulating for ourselves what the goals of our course are in terms of the learning students will do and the changes their thinking will undergo as a result of this learning. Only after we have a clear sense of that destination—our goals—are we ready to make the essential decisions that will guide our students' learning in our course, including how we will assess their progress toward those goals (i.e., what the course assignments and assessments will be) and what kind of practice they need to do throughout the course to make progress toward those goals. This is where we begin to consider the exciting challenges that our disciplines pose and how we can structure work that will require our students to experience those challenges. When we design this kind of work, we make room in our course for our students' thinking and development: our course is now not a collection of content (e.g., theories, concepts, principles). Instead, it is an opportunity for students to learn how they can use the content of our disciplines to begin to think more like experts in our disciplines. Research shows that courses designed using this framework, which is called backward course design, lead to greater student engagement and improved learning outcomes (Harrington & Thomas, pp. 22-23). The backward course design process helps focus our own thinking so that we have a foundation to guide our decision-making throughout the course, and it prepares us and our students for the path that will help them reach the destination.

- **Use your syllabus to help students see how they will move toward the changes in thinking that you're aiming them toward.** A traditional syllabus shows students the content they will study and the work they will do, but it doesn't always help them understand what the path to success will look like. An inviting syllabus does more than tell students which topics they will cover and what assignments they will complete: it gives students an explicit sense of what our course is actually about by communicating our goals, how we (and they) will assess their progress toward those goals, and how the work of the course is specifically designed to prepare them for those assessments. Helping students understand why they are doing the work of our courses is essential to motivation and eliminates the frustration students often experience when they can't understand the reason for or meaning behind the assignments they are asked to do. A motivating syllabus will help students see how the elements of the course (reading assignments, homework, tests and exams, projects, etc.) are designed to work together to help them reach the disciplinary thinking goals of the course. When students understand why they are doing what they are doing and how they can be successful, they are much more likely to engage with our content in meaningful ways and to feel that they are a part of disciplinary inquiry. They are also better prepared to take responsibility for their own behaviors and the outcome of their work in our course.
- **Design your syllabus so that students can see that they are responsible for their own learning.** Traditionally, many have characterized a course syllabus as a contract—an agreement between instructor and students. While this has been a prevailing model for thinking about syllabus design and construction, it is not a

useful characterization. First, it is inaccurate, as Harrington and Thomas (2018) point out: “a syllabus is not, in fact, an enforceable contract, as several court cases have concluded” (p. 4). More importantly, treating the syllabus as a contract can potentially foster an adversarial relationship between instructor and students by creating a situation where the instructor’s job is to “enforce” the contract, and the students’ job is to figure out how to stretch the contract to its limits. An inviting syllabus reframes the relationship between instructor and students: instead of positioning the instructor as the students’ adversary, it allows the instructor to become a guide and an advocate for students’ success. It also creates opportunities for students to take responsibility for and manage their own learning behaviors so that they feel empowered to control their own destiny in our courses. This means that we want to avoid creating a syllabus that is too policy-focused and that puts us in the role of enforcers rather than positioning us as guides to our students’ success. Instead, we want to design policies that frame students as empowered agents who make meaningful choices and reap the consequences, both positive and negative, of those choices. When we think of policies in this way, we can help ensure that our syllabus stays focused on students’ learning rather than getting bogged down in responding to problematic behaviors.

Examples of elements of an inviting syllabus

Sample course description (from a course in Multicultural American Literature)

This course will offer an introduction to several multicultural American fiction writers, with an emphasis on developing critical skills and reading strategies through close readings of texts. In addition to developing reading skills, you will practice writing about literature. Most importantly, this course aims to help you look at the world from new points of view. American writer Richard Ford argues that “it’s fiction’s business to try to enlarge our understanding of and sympathy for people.” This premise will serve as a guide for the course: reading any literature thoughtfully requires the ability to view characters, even those with whom we don’t have much in common or even don’t like, with sympathy. This ability becomes particularly important when you are reading literature written by authors whose cultural background differs from your own. Through the readings of this course, we will explore the inner lives of people—the realities that fiction is uniquely able to reveal—and by doing so, we will rethink the meaning of American identity.

Sample overview of course assignments with rationale (from an Educational Psychology course)

Because this is a course that is preparing you to become an educator, doing presentations is important! You will have the opportunity to do two presentations. Although you are working in groups (four to five students) for these learning activities, you are **graded on an individual basis**.

In addition to being an effective presenter of information, you will also need to create clear written documents such as educational lesson plans. Not only will these assignments help

you enhance your writing skills, but because they are directly connected to your presentations, they are also designed to help you produce a high-quality presentation (Harrington & Thomas, 2018, p. 167).

Sample makeup work policy

It is important to stay on track with your assignments and take exams on schedule; not only will this help you feel less stressed, but it also an important skill you will need in your career. Being able to meet deadlines and juggle many tasks is an important career and life skill. Thus, it is expected that you will complete all assignments and exams according to the schedule. If you have a personal situation that prevents you from doing so, please discuss this with me prior to the due date, if possible, so we can explore options. If it is not possible to discuss this prior to the due date, please reach out as soon as it is possible to do so. While effective time management is an essential skill, I understand that life circumstances can sometimes make this challenging or impossible. (Harrington and Thomas, 2018, p. 69)

References

- Harrington, C., & Thomas, M. (2018). *Designing a Motivating Syllabus*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Hirsch, C. C. (2010). The promising syllabus enacted: One teacher's experience. *Communication Teacher* 24(2), 78-90.
- Palmer, M.S., Wheeler, L.B., & Aneece, I. (2016). Does the document matter? The evolving role of syllabi in higher education. *Change* 48(4), 36-46.

If you'd like to learn more about how to design an inviting syllabus for your course, please feel free to [request a consultation](#).