Designing a Motivating Syllabus

Writing a syllabus is required for the courses we teach, but an effective syllabus does more than simply fulfill a requirement: it presents an important opportunity to begin engaging our students in our courses and in their own learning. This edition of *Teaching at Albany* will focus on a recent book, *Designing a Motivating Syllabus* (2018), by Christine Harrington and Melissa Thomas, which explores the current research on effective syllabus design for student learning. Harrington and Thomas offer several research-based recommendations for designing a syllabus that motivates students and helps them prepare to be successful in your course.

A new way of thinking about the syllabus

Traditionally, the syllabus has been a tool for explaining the content that a course will cover and the assignments that students will complete. However, Harrington and Thomas argue that a syllabus can do much more than simply convey this information: “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). A motivating syllabus 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 shift is important to student motivation because it signals to students that our course is not just about the content, but it is about how learning and working with that content will change them in meaningful ways. This is a fundamental shift in thinking, and it requires us to approach syllabus design differently.

If a motivating syllabus requires us to adopt a new way of thinking, how will this shift in focus help us prepare a syllabus differently? Below are three key principles to guide us through the design of a motivating syllabus.

Principle #1: A motivating syllabus must begin with designing a course that has a clear destination for students.

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. Our course ends when we run out of time to cover content. This process can lead to significant frustration for instructors because we have no basis for making decisions about what content really belongs in the course—and there’s never time to cover it all.

Designing a learning-centered course begins with setting the destination: 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. Choosing what content or topics will be included in the course should only be considered after goals, assessments, and practice have been planned. 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.
Principle #2: A motivating syllabus helps students chart their path to the destination.

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. A motivating 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. Harrington and Thomas call this “a road map for being successful” (p. 24), meaning that students can see not only what is required of them, but also the rationale for those requirements.

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 goals of the course. For example, in an Educational Psychology course, Harrington explains the rationale for a presentation assignment in this way: “Because this is a course that is preparing you to become an educator, doing presentations is important” (p. 167). In describing the kind of practice students will be doing regularly in class, she explains, “In order to learn, you’ll need to be actively involved and engaged with the course content, so you can expect this semester to be filled with lively discussions, activities, and challenging assignments. Because we learn best when engaged with others, you will work with a partner of small group almost every class period” (p. 154). These are small additions to the language of syllabi, but they can change the way students think about their work in our courses. 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. They are also better prepared to take responsibility for their own behaviors and the outcome of their work in our course.

Principle #3: A motivating syllabus puts students in control of their own destiny.

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 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.

A motivating 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. Harrington and Thomas warn against 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. They encourage instructors to be thoughtful and selective about the policies we include, and they provide several important questions to use as we review and develop policies for our courses, including the following:

- Is the policy necessary? Is there research or data available to support the use of this policy?
- What purpose is the policy supposed to serve?
- How does the policy affect different groups of students? Does this policy promote equity and fairness?
- How does this policy affect the learning process? How does this policy influence the achievement of course learning outcomes?
- Is the policy written in a proactive and positive way?
- What messages do your policies send? How will students interpret your policies? (p. 67)

Asking ourselves these questions can help us ensure that our syllabus design stays focused on students’ learning rather than getting bogged down in responding to problematic behaviors.

Conclusion

Designing a motivating syllabus requires more than expertise of our content; it requires important decisions about how we want students to learn in our courses. If you would like to learn more about the backward course design framework and how it can help you create a more motivating syllabus (and a high-impact course), we invite you to join us for our upcoming Course Design Academy in January 2019—or make an appointment to meet with an ITLAL consultant!

References