



## Creating a Dynamic Syllabus: A Strategy for Course Assessment

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A significant contribution of Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* is the concept of the "promising syllabus." Bain argues syllabi should inspire students to learn, serving as "a powerful influence on setting high standards and encouraging people to achieve them" (2004, 75). Not just a static template, in which only dates change from semester to semester, a syllabus also should be a "dynamic document" that motivates "student engagement" and learning (Gruenert-O'Brien, Millis, and Cohen 2008, 37).

A "promising," "dynamic" syllabus is an ideal worth pursuing, but how to we achieve it? How often have we taught a course, made mental notes for improvement, waited many months before teaching the course again, only to realize we failed to incorporate those wonderful changes? Even if we write out our ideas for revision, we sometimes misplace our notes.

A few years ago, after reading about course assessment, I decided to brainstorm a means of not forgetting my mental syllabus notes or losing the handwritten ones and quickly realized I already possessed a safe haven for recording ideas for revising and assessing each course: the syllabus itself.

The mechanics of this method are simple and paperless. After distributing the original syllabus, I create a separate working version of it in Word, distinguishing it from the original by adding the phrase "Assessment Version" to the file name.

During the semester, whenever I have a fresh idea for a course or encounter a glitch, I add notes to the assessment version of the syllabus, including editorial corrections and calendar adjustments; reminders of problems with assignments, tests, or policies; and, most important, ideas for pedagogical improvements.

Having a semester's worth of such commentary safely at hand, I can then perform the bulk of my course assessment.

Soon after final grades are due, I devote several hours to writing reflections about each section of the assessment syllabus, giving special attention to analyzing the degree to which the students achieved the learning objectives. Then, I review how well students responded to the textbooks, grading formula, course policies, and guidelines for assignments and assess their contributions to student learning. Finally, I reconsider the policies, assignments, and exams in light of any major changes I have in mind for the course. My assessment also describes key successes to ensure that the strengths of the course are preserved. This post-semester reflection process often has the added benefit of generating ideas that I can apply to other courses and that I record in the assessment versions of their syllabi.

Maintaining assessment syllabi for my courses enables me to invest time in gauging their strengths and weaknesses while my memories of them are still fresh and before being distracted by preparations for the next semester. In addition, conducting an immediate assessment of each course after it is taught allows for a more efficient revision of the syllabus the next time I teach the course because a significant portion of the work on the syllabus has been completed.

If we treat a syllabus as a document in process rather than as a finished text to be "put to bed" at the end of each semester, we have created a powerful course assessment tool that can play a useful role in conjunction with standardized and open-ended student evaluations as well as classroom observations. In other words, to be genuinely "promising," a syllabus needs to be a "dynamic one."

### REFERENCES

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