Book Review

What is a syllabus? On a basic level, it's simply a document explaining what a course is about – unremarkable. But like all documents, there's more to it if we dig in. How do we understand our syllabus? Is it a straitjacket? An accountability mechanism? A spark for inspiration? Is our syllabus our highest ideal of our course, or just what we can manage to cobble together in the final day of break? Do we enjoy putting it together, or is it just a hoop to jump through, yet another testament to the corporatization of the university?

Whatever the syllabus may be at present, what could it become if we let it? Perhaps something remarkable, as the subtitle of the book *Syllabus* indicates. *Syllabus* encourages teachers of all stripes to interrogate their syllabi, but to ask themselves this question above all. The book provides a series of provocations, invitations for us to think about the craft of teaching, and for us to see the syllabus as a project of thinking-through-writing, a mode for theorizing teaching itself. A few of the questions one encounters in this book are:

- "What would happen if you took the syllabus as seriously as you take the most serious forms of writing in your own discipline?" (p. 1)
- "What changes if you think of a syllabus as a narrative?" (p. 15)
- "What would happen if you began to think of teaching as a writing process?" (p. 163)
- "How can we practice inclusivity while also teaching students how to perform the work of our disciplines? How can we welcome the students, as they really are, when we know that implicit in the act of teaching is the prospect of our students' transformation into some new form of themselves?" (pp. 47–48)

The central refrain of the book is that a syllabus (and a class) is not just about what the teacher will do, but rather what the students will do. The authors William Germano and Kit Nicholls, both teachers at The Cooper Union in New York City, insist on a student-centered pedagogy employing backward design, where the teacher starts with the objectives (what the students should be able to do after the course) and works backwards to the assignments, activities, readings and lectures that will help them get there. Of course, neither the students nor the teacher are working in isolation; they must work together. In this connection, the authors draw up the compelling image of the classroom as a jazz performance, with all its improvisation and harmony. They suggest that the teacher is the bassist (p. 148), keeping everyone to time, but very rarely playing a solo.

Another intriguing thread of the book is a call to consider teaching genuine intellectual work – not just a chore that we must get out of the way before we can do our real research. Germano and Nicholls suggest instead that teaching could be the "animating force" (p. 17) of our intellectual lives. While there may be tension between research and teaching, "for some, that relationship speaks to a divided loyalty, while for others it's exactly the tension between making scholarship and teaching that generates the spark. On the best days, the same spark ignites a teacher's work in the classroom and the scholar's work at a laptop" (p. 194).

The nine chapters of *Syllabus* reflect on a number of themes relevant to designing a class (far more than just writing a syllabus): forming community, thinking about time in the classroom, navigating the trade-offs in constructing a reading list, gauging student learning, and self-assessing one's teaching. Throughout, the authors provide many helpful examples of activities and considerations, such as introducing readings in terms of the questions students should ask themselves while reading (p. 75) in order to prime a discussion, to exposing students to difficult content that they don't yet understand to help them pose questions and set goals for what they need to learn (p. 26).

I heartily recommend this book. Though the authors are rooted in the humanities, their suggestions can be implemented by those of us in the information field. It would be fruitfully read alongside the literature in our field reflecting on various aspects of the syllabus (e.g., Beuoy & Boss, 2019; Dali, 2017; Dubicki, 2019). The book could even find its way onto syllabi for the teaching of information literacy instruction.

Syllabus has many virtues, but there are certain drawbacks. I found the writing overwrought in places, with belabored metaphors and tangential examples that detract from the authors' glowing ideas. More substantially, there is little to no reflection on the *form* of the syllabus, which I was hoping to find in this book. Few of us provide syllabi on paper anymore, and in the digital world I suspect a PDF attachment is not the most student-friendly way to provide a syllabus. What new forms might a 21st-century syllabus take? In the book's final chapter, the authors do consider how teaching may continue to change with new technology, but on this question they are silent.

When is the best time to read a book such as this? When planning a new class? Well in advance of that? For my part, I read *Syllabus* during winter break between terms, while procrastinating on preparing my next terms' syllabi. I followed the authors' suggestion of reading no more than a chapter a day, jotting notes and thinking forward to the syllabi I had to prepare for January. I found myself bursting with ideas and insights that I'm already carrying into my teaching practice as the new term begins. My conclusion is that, while it may have been better to have read this book yesterday, today is not so bad.

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References

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