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# 1

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## What You Do, What They Do

What really *is* a syllabus? Is it a tool or a manifesto?  
A machine or a plan? What are its limits? Its horizon?  
And who is it really for? And what would happen if  
you took the syllabus as seriously as you take the most  
serious forms of writing in your own discipline?

It's so familiar. The first day, the first class meeting, the noises, the competing interests of choosing seats and choosing neighbors, the geometry of students and backpacks, tools, food, books. For you, it's curtain up. You've brought with you a set of handouts, the ones you quickly say are also and always available online in the course learning module. You distribute the handouts, making eye contact as you do it—everyone is so young, and the class is more diverse each time you steal a glance. You're looking for their response, even before they've read a word of what you've set down.

You remind yourself that your students are there for one of two reasons. Either they have to be there, or they want to be there. Either your course is a) required of everyone or maybe required in some specific track, or b) it's an elective. You know that neither category guarantees an easy ride, and you wouldn't want it any other way. Teaching is hard. One of your goals is to have the students who have to be there want to be there. Another goal is surely to make students who choose your course tell others that it was amazing, that you

## 2 • Syllabus

were terrific. Teaching is hard, you tell yourself again. Knowing that is part of being a teacher.

You feel the electricity of performance, the responsibility of winning students over to your discipline. You run through what you're going to say this hour in a distracted, internal monologue. A few moments later, and the class has settled down into what looks like an attentive reading of the hand-out. It feels as if it's your moment to lose: students poring over the little world you've created for them, a place where the hierarchy of the university—your mastery, their innocent but open-minded ignorance—is mediated by a simple document and the set of rules to which it conforms. Their eyes turn to you. Electronics are stowed. You pick up a piece of chalk. House lights down. You begin. You will be at that blackboard, chalk in hand, for sixteen weeks, and during that time your voice, and your brilliance, will fill the space.

You begin talking, but something strange is happening. All your expertise seems to have left you, and you're jabbering on in what you recognize as a steady stream of amateurish nonsense. But that's not the most horrifying part. What's truly frightening is that the students are looking at you as if you're making perfect sense—or, more accurately, as if it doesn't matter whether you're brilliant or banal.

Then the alarm clock goes off and you wake up. It's four a.m., still dark, and you don't have to be on campus for another two weeks. You spent last night fine-tuning your syllabus one last time and in the process ratcheting up your own anxiety.

You've just awakened from one version of the Academic's Performance Dream. In the dream-class, you were about to *tell the students something* for sixteen weeks, which might be fine if your course were a one-way transmission to an adoring audience and nothing more. You wouldn't really teach a class that way.

And yet you're beginning to concede that the dream that woke you is more or less a critique—*your* critique—of your own teaching, your unconscious mind accusing you of a particular kind of earnest, hardworking—what to call it?—laziness. You're half-awake now and recognize too much of your own teaching style. It isn't a horror show—far from it. Reasonably genial, largely inert, a series of solos in which you enacted knowledge of the subject, underscoring memorable points with chalk, points dutifully copied by a silent room of students whose own thoughts remained locked away for the semester or at least until the final exam.

The sun's coming up, and your morning resolution is not to teach that way again. You're not even sure what kind of teaching that was, but it felt deeply incomplete. You're awake now and, breaking the rules you've set for yourself, you've got your laptop open in bed. You're anxiously looking over that syllabus one more time. Is it too much, too little, too complicated, too filled with arrows that point the student to side roads? Could you read your own syllabus and make a reasonable guess as to what the course wants to accomplish, as opposed to what your department's course catalogue says that the course studies or describes? Could you recognize what the course challenges students to do? And how exactly would you, the teacher who wrote that syllabus, follow through on your own expectations for students?

Dreaming or waking, these questions never seem to go away. Teachers aim high. Big targets, big goals. A class that sings with intellectual engagement. Rigorous but fair grading, and each student doing better than you had hoped. The gratification of giving the exemplary lecture to a room of attentive students. Your own delight in the difficulty that comes with thinking seriously about things that count. All good goals, which, taken together, add up to an ideal of the teacher-focused

class. “You’re a star!” says somebody in the hallway, possibly without irony.

But stars are bright, distant things, and the light they throw off is old, old news. What might it mean to teach now, to shine now, in the present, close to the moment and our students? This question is about more than diversity or age or ethnic sensitivity or a sympathetic engagement with the complexities of gender, or disability, or any of the other qualities that distinguish person from person. First or last, teaching is inevitably about all of these things.<sup>1</sup> But to be present asks that we do so much more. Our students, hungry for something that starry light can’t provide by itself, need from us not just knowledge—even knowledge tempered by sensitivity—but craft.

The myth of Prometheus—the Greek name means “forethought”—tells us that this most generous of Titans stole fire from the gods and brought it to us clay-built human creatures, functionally kindling life in our dark world. Teaching in the present is a bit like stealing fire. Here, o starry teacher, the fire is your own but briefly. Teaching is renouncing the glamour and assurance of the well-executed solo and sharing that light with your students, moving the focus from something we’ve long called teaching and giving the torch to learning. You can teach by yourself, or at least tell yourself that you can, but you can’t *learn* (let’s for a moment allow it to be a transitive verb meaning “to make them learn”) by yourself.

Modern English *learn* has as one of its antecedents the Old English form *gelaeran*, which meant “to teach.” This etymological paradox isn’t a paradox at all, of course. If teaching is the thing that happens when students are learning, subject and object come to be bound together, like Aristophanes’s

<sup>1</sup>The randomness of a class’s enrollment is a teacher’s first, and recurring, lesson in life, and it’s a good thing, too.

conception of the sexes balled up inseparably in *The Symposium*, a Möbius-like continuum of teaching and learning, enacted by teacher and student.

We begin to discern the contours of this perplexing space of learning when we awake from the dream (it was always only a dream, never a solid reality) of the masterful teacher delivering knowledge. We can map out something so complex only by making a concerted effort to describe its nuances, conundrums, its areas of density and lightness. We perform this mapping and engage in this forethought when we compose a syllabus, but only if it is indeed an attempt to map the space of learning. Which means that, as we'll say in several ways throughout this book, a syllabus isn't so much about what you will do. It's about what your students will do.

## The Syllabus We Have

The syllabus is the most remarkable, unremarkable document in the history of education. We depend on it as if it were always there, always reliable, always true. We depend on it as a transparent summary of what a classroom can and must accomplish. Some few are better than others. Most aren't nearly as good as the best. The syllabus as we traditionally know it may read as if it's all about what *will* happen in the next sixteen weeks, but to a great extent it's really about what the teacher has experienced as recently as last year and as long ago as graduate school. A teacher crafts a syllabus based on the teacher's own prior experience as a student, in conversation with peers, as a result of the bruises and exaltations last time teaching the course, or some combination of all three.

The traditional syllabus is that starry, bright light from the past shining into today's classroom, even if it looks as if it's news. (Prospero's response to Miranda in *The Tempest*—"Tis

new to thee”—is a phrase you may have heard to describe a student’s response to something, but Prospero’s not the most reflective character in Shakespeare.) It’s never enough, then, for a syllabus to be, as one often hears, “freshened up” for another semester.

The word *syllabus* itself has a curious history. The *Oxford English Dictionary* helps us see *syllabus* as not just a word but a scribal mistake. The story of *syllabus* stretches back to the fourteenth century, when Petrarch was gathering everything he could find of Cicero’s writings. Among the period’s discoveries were the so-called Medicean manuscripts, which contained Cicero’s letters, including those to his great friend Titus Pomponius Atticus. In one of the letters to Atticus (the document in question is Cicero Epp. ad Atticum iv. iv.), the word *sillabos* appears. As the *OED* explains, in the fifteenth century, editions of Cicero’s letters printed the word *syllabus*, “a corrupt reading” of “sittybas or Greek σιττύβας, accusative plural of sittyba, σιττύβα parchment label or title-slip on a book.” From the corrupt reading, scholars posited “a spurious σύλλαβος,” which was then treated as a derivative of the verb συλλαμβάνειν, “to put together, collect.” Every mention of every syllabus since then can be traced back to the misreading of one classical manuscript. So is it *syllabuses* or *syllabi*? There’s probably not much point in worrying about the correct plural of an “ancient” word that was accidentally invented in the fifteenth century.

The Google Books Ngram Viewer, which scans the contents of some five million books, records the first significant appearance of *syllabus* in the second half of the eighteenth century. That would suggest that the concept of the syllabus is one of the Enlightenment’s many undertakings. It’s not until the period after World War I, however, that *syllabus* begins its meteoric rise. The word itself is almost a synonym for the methodical organization of modern educational



practice: Syllabus equals authority, or at least stands as authority's flag.

From the Enlightenment through the middle of the twentieth century, the syllabus was most often understood as a table of contents—or simply the content—of a course, a listing of the expert knowledge that the professor would deliver to students. The syllabus has even been invested with a religious aura; the *OED* records one definition of the term as “a summary statement of points decided and errors condemned by ecclesiastical authority,” a usage with its own surprising history.

In 1864, the papacy of Pius IX issued a “Syllabus errorum”—*syllabus* here meaning simply a list, or catalogue, of condemned practices, attitudes, and opinions. The “Syllabus errorum”—a list of errors, or heresies, that had crept into earlier documents concerning points of theology and other Church matters—culminated in a stance against “progress, liberalism, and modern civilization,” clearly meant as a blanket defense against the breaking news of the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Four decades later, Pope Pius X renewed the Vatican's defenses with another *syllabus*—“*Lamentabili sane*”—to which the Church gives the explanatory English subtitle “Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists.” “With truly lamentable results,” it declares, “our age, casting aside all restraint in its search for the ultimate causes of things, frequently pursues novelties so ardently that it rejects the legacy of the human race.”<sup>3</sup>

Neither papal syllabus is meant as a teaching tool in the ordinary sense. They're more like manifestos. In the twenty-first

<sup>2</sup>Pope Pius IX, “The Syllabus of Errors,” 1864, *Papal Encyclicals Online*, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>Pope Pius X, “*Lamentabili Sane*: Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists,” 1907, *Papal Encyclicals Online*, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lamen.htm>.

century it would be the rare classroom indeed that was organized around a syllabus that included refutation of modernism—much less modernity—as a learning outcome. Though as a teacher you might be tempted to gather up your own catalogue of errors—from common grammatical mistakes to the tried, true, and oh so tired default of the five-paragraph essay—into a classroom handout.<sup>4</sup>

Much of what happens in the classroom involves rules. For those of us who teach, the syllabus is not only document but rule book, canvas, and plan, and perhaps most of all a model for imagining a sphere of operations for a course's ideas. Think for a moment of the armillary spheres that Chinese and then Renaissance astronomers built as they tried to envision the universe. Like this or any model, your syllabus is reductive: It can't possibly name every potential condition, every possible state, that your class will exhibit. (And it may—or maybe even necessarily will—get some things wrong.) But it tries. A social scientist might describe the syllabus as a rule-bound system that attempts to anticipate and induce a set of behaviors in and beyond your classroom. We all have to anticipate and induce.

Now imagine a whole sequence of your syllabi—revisions of the same course from year to year, perhaps over a couple of decades—but animated like a time-lapse film documenting its evolution. Have the syllabi with which you work become more or less accurate—more or less true to the life of real classroom teaching and learning? Many faculty would likely say more, many would say less, and still more would probably find the question odd. Those who say it's become more accurate might argue that the syllabus's growing inclusion of statements

<sup>4</sup>John Warner gets to the heart of it in *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

on accommodating student learning differences, counseling resources, and the like better address the needs of our students. Countering such claims, others might argue that administrative impositions on our syllabi are transforming them from something that models how we want our classrooms to operate into something that models the way lawyers or corporate boards see higher education. Many will find the exercise absurd: Syllabi just aren't that important, and other than spelling out requirements, they don't have that much to do with the week-to-week work of a semester.

You've no doubt looked at those quasi-legal (or straightforwardly legal) disclaimers and sections in your syllabi and wondered what they signify about changes in how college education works. Today these are—more explicitly than ever—the rules of classroom behavior, and they are substantial. Here are the HR policies at this institution, the small type containing the recourse a student may have if rules of behavior are violated. Here are the emails and phone numbers that will connect students with necessary resources on and off campus to help with stress, or illness, financial dilemmas, even homelessness. Obligatory paragraphs might cover the precise number of absences permitted, even though every person who teaches (and who therefore commits to showing up to each class meeting) has to suppress disappointment when even a strong student seems to take advantage of the attendance “lenience” that, according to departmental policy, the syllabus must spell out.

Some people talk of forgiveness, as if missing class is a venial sin or civil misdemeanor, while students are more likely to talk of skipping class and taking “excused” absences. Some institutions require that the syllabus contain the entirety of the institution's academic integrity policy, detailing what is and is not plagiarism and the consequences of violating that policy. Sometimes those consequences are spelled out in *first*

*strike, second strike, third strike* terms. Policies, resources and warnings, caveats and urgings.

We recognize that much of this material has emerged in relation to complex problems of power, access, and fairness. Some of the required statements and counseling resources are valuable, if not all of equivalent value, taken one by one. But their presence on the syllabus inevitably moves the document from a plan for learning into a contract for satisfying a degree requirement. The teacher's contribution to the syllabus can seem as if it's crowded out by administrative fine print, so that it's easy to look at a syllabus and think that the three Rs are readings, regulations, and recourse. We're not teachers if we're salespeople servicing customers. The syllabus isn't the warranty on a Toyota. We're not lay therapists or auxiliary police, either. We're teachers.<sup>5</sup>

And yet. What was simple fifty years ago is now complex, deliberate, attentive, and crowded with intentions. The syllabus has become not just a document but a contested space, a space where we can see one of the central forms for planning and carrying out higher learning slipping away from faculty control and, for that matter, from its ideal point of origin: A good syllabus is borne of a real teacher's experiences working with real students. Like any piece of writing, it will be only as good as its ability to communicate urgently and effectively with readers.

<sup>5</sup>Change a word and you do, usually, change how you imagine what that word describes. Throughout this book, we'll refer to you, the people doing the teaching, as teachers rather than as professors. This is partly a move that recognizes the many titles contingent faculty bear in the contemporary university—and the friction they feel when a student addresses them as “professor.” But it's also an attempt to embrace what is often a marginalized part of our jobs as faculty. You already know the complex reasons for that marginalization. For our purposes, what's important is that, at least in the confines of this book, we grow comfortable imagining ourselves through the language of teaching.

## The Syllabus We Could Have

“So why would anyone want to read a book about the syllabus?” We’ve encountered that question many times in putting this project together. Not necessarily in so many words, of course, but we knew what was implied. And the next question—unspoken or not—becomes, “Why would anyone *write* a book about the syllabus?”

If you look at much of what’s been written on the subject of education, it’s clear that not many scholars thought that the syllabus itself was worth their readers’ time, or their own. Books and articles about teaching, and about the syllabus especially, are often reductive, often clinically abstracted from the realities of our specific disciplinary work. On the one hand, they offer programs for reducing the labor of the classroom to a repertoire of standard actions and protocols. On the other hand, they seem to be part of a conversation among education scholars rather than being written to meet the concerns and needs of teachers themselves. With the best of intentions, such books participate in the work of defining teaching and learning by restricting both, not out of ill will but out of what reads like an unwillingness to acknowledge the lives of real students, in real bodies, engaging real problems, and real texts, taught by real teachers. We often ignore this kind of writing because it feels so very distant from what it’s actually like to be in a college—or any—classroom.

Books about teaching are often talking to one another.<sup>6</sup> They are, if you will, books about books about teaching rather than books about the thing we do in the classroom. While so-called learning-centered models of teaching are rooted in

<sup>6</sup>The same can, of course, be said about most studies within any scholarly discipline.

important insights coming from dedicated scholars and theorists, these same models have increasingly come to be attached to an administrative discourse that makes many of us uncomfortable. Too much writing about teaching bears more in common with internet listicles (“8 Common Mistakes to Avoid Making in the Classroom,” “5 Simple Ways to Increase Student Engagement”) than a centuries-old practice we carry forward with a sense of deep responsibility. This piecemeal approach to talking about teaching implies that one can simply drop teaching techniques into an existing course, like installing a plug-in to your internet browser. Teaching isn’t like that.

We’re trying here to do something that connects directly to both the big picture and the tight close-up of the educational experience. The syllabus seemed to us the nexus of big and tight, the place where philosophical ambitions and epistemological assumptions meet next week’s reading assignment and prep for a midterm. The question for us, then, becomes thinking through these multiple goals and constraints. You may be surprised to see, in a book on the syllabus, as much engagement with the everyday of the semester—with lesson plans, with the texture of momentary teaching quandaries, and so on. But like the teaching/learning continuum we described earlier, the distinction between your syllabus and your classroom teaching is far harder to make than a traditional approach to the syllabus permits.

So, we’ve been asked, “Why not a book on, say, effective teaching, or how to get students to read more in the age of digital distraction?” Our answer is straightforward: There are many kinds of teaching and many environments in which teaching takes place. The syllabus is the constitutive document for these courses of teaching and learning—a thing we make, or should make, any time we hope to bring a body of people into a body of knowledge. And so this book on the syllabus is also a book on effective teaching that begins with your

syllabus—and a book on getting students to read that starts with the reading list in which your syllabus takes evident pride.

We've spoken with many teachers who find their own college's faculty development efforts in relation to course design lacking—primarily because they feel that these efforts aren't adequate to the specific challenges of teaching what they teach to the real students in their classes. Our sense is that the syllabus needs a reevaluation and, ultimately, a higher status in academic discourse, so that we can use it to answer that question. And this sense has led us to a different way of thinking about it, one that fuses the intellectual ambitions of higher learning with the practical realities of navigating a semester. It's also an approach to the syllabus that tries to honor what we *don't* know (a lot; almost everything) about your discipline, your students, your institution. So how can we imagine a better syllabus, in order to be better teachers?

For starters, let's agree that a syllabus is, above all else, a *design for student work*. Again, it's about what *they* will do, not so much about what you'll do. A steady reform movement has for decades been advocating a different relationship between faculty and students, one in which nurturing and motivating supplants deciding and condemning. The goal becomes to discern what you, the teacher, want your students to be able to do—with a body of knowledge, with a set of disciplinary practices—and to learn or invent ways to get students to do these things. Not only does a great deal of scholarship point to this approach as an effective way to teach, but faculty who have tried it usually find that the everyday experience of teaching is much more intellectually engaging than traditional, more comfortably risk-free, ways of organizing class time.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The academic literature on the effectiveness of what is too simply called "active learning" is so robust that it's absurd to attempt to summarize it here. Perhaps it's better to point to works that compile that research: John C. Bean's extremely

To get to intellectual engagement is the big challenge. It's more than great lecturing or dazzling PowerPoint (in fact it's rarely about great lecturing and never about dazzling PowerPoint). It's less about polish than you may think, or at least not the kind of polish that we may all have been taught is one hallmark of the Great Teacher. Getting students' attention is part of the job, but circus performers can do that just as well as, if not better than, teachers. We're not advocating red noses and rubber chickens, though if they work for you, that's fine, too.<sup>8</sup> Teaching well is knowing what to do with your students' attention once you have it. It's more than having them shut off their phones and close their laptops. It's breaking up the center of attention so that there are, finally, not one but many centers of attention.

A syllabus is an opportunity to draft a sequence of activities that students will perform in a specific order. Like any time-based medium, the college course needs a narrative, but that narrative will be both enacted and experienced primarily by your students rather than by you. If you're paying attention yourself, every time you teach a course you'll discover new nuances to the story it tells. But those nuances will emerge from the surprising things your students do with the activities—readings, problem sets, labs, essays, performances, presentations, group work, case studies, and more—that you've planned and developed.

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useful and widely read *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011); Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); and Peter C. Brown et al., *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). The list could go on and on.

<sup>8</sup>A degree of clowning can sometimes help students learn. When we take risks and appear to be the biggest goofball in the room, students often feel more free to take their own risks.



Here's where we want to make a move: What changes if you think of a syllabus as a narrative? A good narrative, as every reader knows, is driven by not-knowing. ("No spoilers!") Every good course, then, sets up mysteries, problems, as-yet-unresolved difficulties with which students will wrestle all term. Narrative is also driven by turns, transformations, moments of recognition. Every good course stacks the deck in favor of these developments, even as it remembers that they're for the students to find, not for us to "deliver."<sup>9</sup>

It's important to say that thinking this way about the classroom isn't: a) giving up your responsibility as a teacher, or b) somehow turning the class over to those who expect you to teach. If we're trying to *induce* student learning rather than deliver teaching, we'll initially have made *more* work for ourselves, while our students will probably have roughly the same quantity of work to do but in a different register and with different consequences. The kind of work we're talking about for you is intellectual work, above all—figuring out just *how* somebody who doesn't yet understand what good work looks like in your discipline would build the curiosity, technique, habits, and understanding necessary to do that work. That it's about what *they* do becomes still more clear when you consider the point philosophically. (Note to self: Don't even think of teaching unless you're ready to think philosophically about what you do—at least sometimes.) People learn far more by doing things than by watching others do things. If we accept that this is true, then it quickly becomes clear that a syllabus isn't primarily a shopping list or manifesto: It's a design for student work.

<sup>9</sup>*Deliver* is, unfortunately, a verb in common use in administrative and accreditation discourse. A 2019 Open University "Innovation Report" even suggests, as an important future direction for higher education, "drone-based learning," which implies the "delivery of education" is following Amazon perhaps a bit more closely than most of us would find comfortable.

We achieve really good design only when we go through a *design process*. For most of us, that process will take place primarily in writing, so we want to state emphatically that the kind of syllabus we're advocating here is one that we arrive at through a writing process. Like student papers dashed off at the last minute, dashed-off syllabi usually aren't very good. We need the space of note-taking, drafting, revising, and rewriting to figure out *what we really think* about how our course ought to proceed.

The paradigm of "writing to learn" has spread to many departments in many colleges, primarily through Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives. In essence, it argues that students shouldn't be asked to write only to show that they've learned something. The act of writing—especially in low-stakes forms that won't be graded, like short response papers, rough drafts, or note-taking—offers students a chance to compose their thinking, figure out what they don't know, attempt to explain things they're just beginning to understand, and frame problems in terms that make sense to them individually.

So why don't we talk about the syllabus as an occasion of "writing to learn" for teachers? Think of all the mysteries of a semester—why one student disappears, why another who had seemed so promising ultimately failed, why the assignment you thought would work so well resulted in unreadable papers, and why the other one you dashed off led to such a great discussion. To come to a better understanding of these complexities, we need to write about them. In order to work through the vast terrain of what we *could* assign—all the readings, the exams, the problem sets, the presentations—we teachers need to write. Just as in the case of an article we're drafting, much of what we write won't wind up in the syllabus. Our writing process should take as its epistemic base—its foundational assumption about knowledge—the sense data of every class taught, the evidence of every assignment evaluated, and the rich resource

of your scholarly life, which is itself a continual practice rather than some set of unchanging precepts.

Thinking of the syllabus as a space for understanding your teaching practice will, if we're being honest, make it harder to write it. There is no easy teaching. Ever. This is simply the hard-won, deeply felt truth of the classroom. Teaching well—with what some will call enthusiasm, some will call joy, and still others will call passion—is serious labor. If a syllabus is to enable real learning, the command not just of a body of knowledge but of the methods and ethos that underlie that knowledge, we'll have to think a great deal more about teaching. We all know the barriers to that—the privileging of research for those on the tenure track, the overworked and underpaid status of those not, the cyclical and potentially repetitive grind all teachers face. But to teach really well and to enjoy it, we ought to see teaching as one of the highest possible forms of our intellectual work, not as something separate from the core of our scholarly lives but as its animating force. Whatever we do, we do for those who come after us—and teaching is a central way that our knowledge becomes active in the world.

## The Pedagogical Contract

The syllabus is also the place to think hard about questions at the core of higher learning. Or even about the idea of questions. As Jill Lepore suggests in *These Truths*, her ambitious history of the United States, the nation was founded on an epistemological question masquerading as a statement of fact.<sup>10</sup> In one draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas

<sup>10</sup>Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

Jefferson suggested that “we hold these truths”—“political equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people”—“to be sacred & undeniable.”<sup>11</sup> But Benjamin Franklin made a critical edit, changing “sacred & undeniable” to “self-evident.”<sup>12</sup> By doing so, he shifted Jefferson’s claim from the surety of theology to the evidence-based reasoning of the Enlightenment.

Lepore urges us to think of the statement as more of a question: “Does American history prove these truths, or does it belie them?”<sup>13</sup> And, alongside this question, we’re forced to ask how a diverse group of people can collectively evaluate bodies of evidence and deliberate their way to shared understandings—of real situations, problems, and the right courses of action in a democracy.

Today we are in the midst of a set of epistemic crises. New information technologies have, on the surface, democratized knowledge, but they have also enabled the mass dissemination of misinformation and outright lies. Those conditions have given rise to distrust of experts and expert knowledge, especially knowledge produced by universities. There is a widespread passive acceptance of a political economic ideology that regards knowledge as worth preserving or producing only insofar as it is capable of turning a profit for someone, which then spurs a turn toward quantification, where everything must be measured and therefore measurable. These trends have generated a profound disembodiment of knowledge, so that it no longer exists in physical and corporeal sites—libraries, archives, people, and crucially *in the social relations among individuals*.

The U.S. Constitution engages some of the ways that democratic subjects discover, evaluate, and reason about evidence, but it has produced rules governing these epistemic practices

<sup>11</sup> Jefferson, quoted in Lepore, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Lepore, xv.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

in only certain areas of public life, primarily the law. It leaves room for all sorts of interpretation, the consideration of all manner of evidence, in everyday life—for better and for worse. People are free to reason their way to a belief that the Earth is flat. A syllabus, in contrast, *must* make rules about epistemic practice. In fact, that is its most important function and the underlying motivation for its content. *This is the evidence we will consider. This is how we will consider it. These are the ground rules for how we will work collectively through it.* The rights and responsibilities a syllabus sets for knowledge-making ultimately matter far more than those it sets for attendance and grading.

How a syllabus might do that is one of the central throughlines of this book. Always underlying that throughline is our anxiety that something has gone dramatically wrong in public use of the forms of evidence and interpretation necessary to the everyday conduct of civil society. The classroom models the world at the same time that students explore that world. As our lives are rendered more abstract, distant, and digital, it can be easy to forget just how much of a college course is made out of the everyday dynamics of each class meeting.

Teachers teach and learners learn not just out of their brains but out of their bodies. They do so because they have no choice (who ever has a choice not to be anchored in their own body?). In the classroom, the teacher's objective is the students' minds. "I'm here to help you expand your minds," says the teacher, sounding for a moment just a little bit pharmacological. But the students' minds are anchored in their bodies, just as the teacher's mind is. Teaching may be primarily an intellectual exercise, but it's deeply and inevitably grounded in the corporeal. "We educate minds," a teacher may say, but those minds are housed in bodies.

Bodies produce the syllabus, too. Teachers teach—from their knowledge, their training, from the unfinished business

of their own curiosity, from the desire to inform and to create in their students a hunger for more knowledge—one might even say a desire to create a hunger for the hunger itself. The tree of knowledge is not unrelated to other addictive flora.

To bring our students—the real students of the twenty-first century—into the epistemic practices of our disciplines will require a different sort of social contract than that upon which most twentieth-century classrooms relied. As we try to ensure that we’re educating a more representative cross section of the country, as our classrooms come to look more like the nation as a whole, we discover blind spots that are partly ours, partly the heritage of our institutions. The syllabus is the beginning of learning to see what had been invisible, just as much or more for us as for our students. In this way and others, teaching is a social act that cannot be automated or “rationalized”—in Max Weber’s sense of the word, meaning rendered “efficient”—quantified, bureaucratized, altogether uprooted from the human realities that have always defined teaching and learning.

Which is why this book might best be thought of as a design manual, a writing guide, or simply a series of provocations. We’re not here to tell you how to teach but rather to help you use the activity of composing a syllabus to discern and foreground your own questions and concerns about your students’ learning.

All of this, we hope, suggests why we wanted to write a book about the syllabus and why we hope you’ll want to read one. The classroom isn’t the only space for learning; taking account of a full life well led, it may not even be the most important space. The college classroom, however, has long been seen as an important gateway into adult life. It would be an insult to our ideas of equality and fairness if the current push to make it available to as many people as possible also sees its higher ambitions dimmed. The classroom is only one of a lifetime’s

opportunities to learn, but it's a space where students can see how highly developed (and potentially narrow) disciplinary practices connect to so much else in life. The space we—teachers, students—share is an experiment, a community, and only secondarily a test, even if there are, as there almost always must be, tests, attendance records, and a syllabus.

The practices we'll outline in this book are rooted in the college classroom, but we believe they could easily echo in the faculty lounges of specialized high schools, religious institutions, vocational programs, and even corporate training units—any educational environment that makes visible a plan for what a course will do. The making-visible is the work of what usually gets called a course description or announcement, which fills something like the function of an abstract, pulling to the surface the briefest narrative of what will happen in a course. And yet, anyone who's ever taken a class knows that the real real of a class isn't going to be in a course description. It's going to be in the syllabus.

This book is written for teachers. We hang out a welcome sign to others, too—administrators, librarians, archivists, parents, anyone with an interest in education—but the book is always about teachers and teaching. And because it's about teachers and teaching, it's about students. Not about students *also* but about students *all the time*.

If we slow down that idea, it might read like this: Everything that we want to happen in—and because of—the classroom experience is to be valued to the extent that students do, make, engage, resist, embrace (ideas, histories, principles, theories—you'll know best what you're teaching and what overriding objectives motivate you). If *their* doing, making, engaging, resisting, and embracing becomes the objective of *your* teaching, then everything changes.

Which is where the syllabus comes in.

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