For Openers... an Inclusive Course Syllabus[1]

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Background

To work in higher education is to work in a closed system. Those of us who are insiders to that system go about our business, occasionally surprised by a tacit ground rule we hadn't yet internalized, but for the most part we have been quietly socialized by extended stays in college, then graduate school, to norms we cannot name.

In general, this closed system feels comfortable to us. Even those members of the professorate who have built their careers as critics of the academic establishment make their livelihood within the comfortable security of tenure and the largely self-defined workscope of the

[1]Chapter 5. *New Paradigms for College Teaching.* 1997. Wm. E. Campbell & Karl A. Smith, Eds. Interaction Book Company.

academy. A bit of the monastery, a tinge of the jet set, a piece of the marketplace, a dollop of politics, a touch of the shopping mall—the closed system of higher education is a comfortable congeries of the arcane and the pedestrian.

To the newcomers who are our students, however, the norms and ground rules of higher education are neither clear nor valued. Granted, some few have had a chance to peer into our world. Perhaps their parents were successful in college; perhaps they've been privileged by co-enrollment in college courses while in secondary school; perhaps they're just quick studies. To the majority of our students, and especially to the so-called "new students" (those historically under-represented in higher education, such as older students, members of ethnic and racial minority groups, first-generation college students, single parents), our courses make real the pain of being strangers in a strange land. Not surprisingly, there is evidence that self-perception of outsider status among students leads to alienation and contributes to dropping-out (A. W. Astin. *What Matters in College*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1993)

While we might not be able to do a lot about the complex social forces that contribute to insider/outsider dynamics, we can make our own courses sites where outsiders become insiders. We can de-mystify the obscure processes of the academy. Most importantly, we can make explicit the befuddling mores, assumptions, work habits, background knowledge, key terms, or other markers of the academic subculture too often left implicit, inaccessible to outsiders. And the starting place for that is the course syllabus, built on the principle of *full disclosure of the terms of success*.

Most often, I've found, course syllabi aren't given nearly enough thought. With word

processing, it is easy—too easy—to play it safe, to call up a previous semester's entry (a file we might have inherited from a colleague who teaches the same course, who in turn may have inherited it from a professor in graduate school who taught the course, who may have...). We plug in some new dates or a new title, and *presto!* we're deluded into thinking we're up to date.

I'd like to propose that we think about the syllabus more complexly, for the sake of our students and for the sake of our own professional development. The syllabus lets us help students think of themselves as insiders in the strange world built by academics, and the process of its construction and revision affords us periodically recurring opportunities to be self-critical about our course, its content, and our approach to it. As much as any research monograph, the syllabus is a site where our professional integrity is tested and where our professional identity is formed.

Preparation

Before looking at the parts of a syllabus or at the language which forms it, let's step way, way back and begin with what might seem like artificially simple *basic assumptions* about our individual syllabus, *the goals and objectives* we have for the course, and the *resources at our disposal in the course site.*

Basic Assumptions

I'll offer the following as points of departure, recognizing that there are few universal basic assumptions, hoping that you might supplement this list with others which reflect your own

circumstances.

Assumption 1: **My syllabus enacts my theory of teaching**—even if I didn't know I had a theory of teaching. Actually, all of our teaching enacts our theory of teaching, but the syllabus is the place where it gets codified tangibly, publicly. Whether I think teaching is a process of individual discovery or a matter of dispensing knowledge to passive students or a construct of interdependent collaborative communities, that theory will, and should, show up in my syllabus.

Assumption 2: My syllabus functions as a figure of the course and its theory. Its recursive nature (i.e. students consult it daily) gives it significant defining power, both connotatively and denotatively. If I want to know what the course looks like from the outside, what the course looks like to colleagues, to students, to the parents of students, the syllabus will show me.

Assumption 3: Students are not usually telepathic. I have to be very careful about what I assume students know or what I take for granted about their knowledge of how my course works. In general, the closer the students are to having just entered my institution, the less they will know about how things work; the more experienced they are, the more they are likely to know. This is especially true as I address increasingly diverse students in courses I teach.

Assumption 4: Faculty are responsible for building courses that promote the success of all students who legitimately enroll in their courses, not just the most experienced, the most familiar, the most attractive, or the most highly achieving. A syllabus that discloses all the terms of participation and the nature of all work to be performed establishes an assumption of inclusion of all members of the class.

Assumption 5: As faculty, it is our job to disclose as much insider knowledge as

possible to promote the success of all students, and the syllabus is an important tool in such disclosure of tacit knowledge. This is especially true in courses that enroll freshmen or beginning majors, and in settings, such as large urban, commuter institutions, where we might reasonably expect to find many of the new students most likely to come to college without intellectual, social, and cultural insider status.

Your own situation will no doubt create different versions of these assumptions and additional ones. It's not likely that all assumptions about students on an urban commuter campus like mine, for instance—with 38,000 students across the full range of ACT scores, social classes, life situations, and ethnic-cultural backgrounds—will apply in smaller, residential, more homogeneous, more highly selective settings. *Regardless of the specifics of your situation, it is good to list explicitly your tacit assumptions as you begin to think about constructing a syllabus.*

Goals and Objectives

In addition to listing unstated assumptions, it is a good idea to force yourself to articulate *goals and objectives for the course* well before you begin to put together the syllabus. Most typically, courses exist because they have gone through a faculty/administrative process peculiar to a local institution. In nearly all cases, courses in colleges and universities get reviewed by departmental curriculum committees, and in that process it is usually the case that general goals and objectives have been stated rather formally for review by the curriculum committee or similar body. If you've not done so, you might want to review what these foundational documents say about the course for which you are preparing a syllabus. Knowing what your

colleagues have imagined a course to be and what their rationale might have been for approving its general shape and objectives will help you define your own approach.

Additionally, you will want to articulate as fully as you can the following sets of goals, perhaps for disclosure to students through inclusion in your syllabus, perhaps solely for your own benefit as you prepare to create the syllabus:

What are the content or mastery goals for the course as defined by the department? This will usually be apparent from the foundational documents for a given course, but you may have to consult colleagues or your notes from faculty meetings to get the full picture. Usually, these departmental goals will be somewhat general. For example, in a course on the history of slavery in the U.S., the departmental goals and objectives might stipulate treatment of topics such as the geography of African origins, the geography of American slave economies, economic impacts and changes over time in such impacts, philosophical arguments used to justify slavery, abolitionism, and emancipation. Specifics of sequence and methods would not likely be detailed. In the syllabus you prepare for your particular offering of the course, you should assume that colleagues expect you to address these general goals explicitly.

What additional content or mastery goals do you bring to the particular version of the course you will teach? Since departmental goals and objectives are typically rather general and focussed on the minimum collegial expectations, you should define for yourself (and perhaps for the students) more specific goals and objectives you might have. To build from the example of a course on the history of slavery in the U.S., you might wish to add content goals about the family in slavery, differences in the legal status of slaves from colony to colony and state to state, the slave trade and middle passage, women in slavery, and religion. These additional goals and

objectives might reflect your own interests or specialty, your values, new thinking in the field since original departmental approval of the course, your students' special interests, or other influences.

What are the process or skills goals for the course as defined by the department? In addition to content or mastery goals set out by the department, you might find that there is departmental or collegiate direction on other matters. It might be that our hypothetical course in the history of slavery also serves to introduce the students to work with primary sources, with departmental skills goals stipulating that students work with slave narratives as a way of coming to know primary source material in historical study. Or it may be that the course serves a "writing intensive" purpose in the freshman curriculum, etc. Granted, it is unlikely that a clean division between content and skills goals can stand close scrutiny, but it is a helpful distinction from which to begin a process of reflection.

What additional process or skills goals do you bring to the course as you teach it? In addition to those processes or skills stipulated by the department, you may have additional goals in this domain. For instance, you might wish to introduce students to on-line databases or CD-ROM bibliography tools in your discipline—in our hypothetical course on slavery in the U.S., various social sciences indexes. Or you might value highly collaborative work, and might need to build into the syllabus directions and time to cover overtly the communication processes and skills needed to carry off productive collaboration. In any case, to build a coherent syllabus and to support students' success in the course, you should be overt about such skills acquisition, whether the skills goals emanate from departmental dicta or your own values.

Resources: Taking Inventory of the Course Site

Courses change shape as a function of many things. Class size may determine the amount of student writing you can manage; the availability or absence of teaching assistants or lab assistants may shape your thinking about active learning strategies to use; the amount and type of computer access and support you have will determine whether you use simulation software or live labs; designation as an honors section may affect your baseline expectations of students; the time of day the course is offered or the length of the class period may make some approaches practical and eliminate others from consideration. In most cases, your syllabus should detail for students any number of resources and procedures for their use, and therefore the syllabus will change as resources dictate. In short, you'll likely consider lots of things external to the subject matter or goals of the course prior to designing an effective syllabus for a specific offering of a course.

To advance this process of course site inventory, you might want to begin by articulating answers to the following questions. Indeed, until you come to know fully the ins and outs of all sectors of your campus, you might want to make actual lists in preparation for writing your syllabus. While it may seem artificial to do so, it is nonetheless essential to plan course specifics in view of particular settings, rather than from a generic or dated ideal situation.

Individual situations vary widely, to be sure. The following inventory items provide only a start:

Who will enroll in the course? How many of them? A colleague who teaches courses in Fluid Mechanics had first taught these large lecture courses as if all those enrolled were majoring in Mechanics and Aerospace Engineering—her home department. Frustrated with

relatively high dropout and failure rates, she looked closely at information supplied by the registrar and learned over the years that only about 30% of those enrolled in her course actually conformed to her imagined profile. Fully two-thirds of those who enroll are from diverse backgrounds she had not anticipated, ranging predictably across engineering disciplines, but also including students in Physics, Natural Resources, and Mathematics. To make the course workable, she has added tutorials, has spent more time with foundational materials, has provided a wider range of problems in her problem sets, and has radically changed the examples and simulations from which she moves toward theoretical clarity.

Quite predictably, the syllabus has changed as a reflection of her new realization about the population in the course and her new approaches to them. She cannot assume familiarity with how her department's tutorial operation works, since most of the students have not taken prior courses in that department. She now includes in the syllabus a section on how to access tutorial help and make best use of tutorial sessions. Formerly a one-page sheet with office hours and abbreviated daily readings and problem numbers from the textbook, her syllabus is now a multi-page document. Since the syllabus addresses what she knows to be a very sophisticated group of students (all are in at least their third year of university, and all of them are fairly advanced in Mathematics, for instance), it is not as fully explanatory as would be a syllabus for a freshman introductory course. But, since her digging through information on enrollments resulted in the discovery that English is a second or third language for nearly half of her students, she has made stylistic and vocabulary choices which are accessible across a fairly wide range of reading levels. Her syllabus for the diverse lecture course with its 80-120 students is, of course, now quite different than it was prior to her inquiry about whom to anticipate in the course!

What courses are prerequisite for my course? What procedures can I assume my students to be familiar with, or what specific knowledge can I bank on? What procedures etc. will I treat only briefly, and which will I need to address specifically in full? Some courses stand alone and do not define a predictable baseline of prior learning; others build on prior knowledge made specific by attaching requirements that students must have completed other courses prior to the course in question. If your course has prerequisite courses, you may want to examine recent syllabi for those prerequisites, being sure to note how your syllabus can and cannot build from what you find there. For example, building a syllabus for the first course in a three-course sequence in Chemistry for non-majors requiring only college level algebra, for which you might be able to make no assumptions whatsoever about new students' prior learning in Chemistry, will likely be quite different from building a syllabus for the third course in that sequence. While you need to build the syllabus for the first course from the ground up, elaborating on procedures and policies, in writing the syllabus for the third part of the course sequence you can probably make some assumptions about familiarity with the function of homework, safety equipment, lab procedures, or tutorial centers.

What human resources are available to me in teaching this particular section of the course? The vagaries of budget allocations and competition across departments for limited human resources lead to shifts in availability of help in course management—people such as clerical support, computer technicians, and skilled teaching/lab assistants. This, in turn, determines in part how we teach and how we design and present our course to our students in the syllabus. In the same vein, we should realize that not all students know how to use tutors or teaching assistants productively. Too often for beginning students (especially non-traditional

students), being referred to the teaching assistant for help evokes images of detention in high school or unfortunate assumptions of stupidity based on skin color, hairstyle, or gender. In making an inventory of available human resources for your syllabus, categories overlap—here, in planning the syllabus document, you should consider not only whether you have access to assistants etc. to help with the load of a large course or with labs, but also whether students likely to enroll will know how to take advantage of this resource. A course for beginners might need a very different presentation of tutors and assistants than would a course for more advanced students familiar with departmental support personnel and their functions. Your syllabus will eventually need to address not only whom is available for help, but how students might use them.

What non-human resources are available to you in teaching this particular section of the course? In making this list for yourself, consider the full range of tools accessible by you or by the students. Where relevant, these resources might include computer facilities, locker rooms, livestock barns, slide collections, listening rooms, specimen vaults, map collections, simulation software, theaters etc. As a working academic who is in daily contact with such resources and materials, it is easy for you to overlook the fact that students who are outsiders don't know about such resources or their location. You may need to list in the syllabus detailed directions to some facilities, or you may need to specify such things as the size or optimal density of computer disks. Given the responses you provided to earlier inventory items about who will enroll in the course, you may need to give some attention to things which seem to you to be perfectly obvious, such as the location of library materials especially useful to the course or procedures for procuring items you might have placed on your library's "reserve reading" list.

Naturally, the inventory that *you* do will reflect your subject matter and the level at which

the course is offered. How much of the inventory gets translated into syllabus material will likewise reflect the particulars of the course. But without knowing what's available and how it supports the work of students in the course, how can you build your syllabus?

Building the syllabus

Getting down to making the text that will be your syllabus should go a lot more smoothly if you have done your preparatory work. You'll have made explicit what you and your colleagues want the course to do, what you can expect the students to know or not know, what resources you and the students will be able to access to carry forward the work of the course, how you hope to approach the content and skills goals of the course, how the various parts of the course fit together—even whether the room in which you teach has moveable tables and flip charts for collaboration or bolted benches designed for lectures before large audiences. Putting all of this into a coherent, effective document is the next challenge.

Generally, syllabi have at least three parts. The goal of each part is to make explicit how the course operates and how students can best succeed. The three basic sections are

(1) Background Information,

(2) Schedule and Assignments, and

(3) Procedures.

We'll discuss each of these sections in turn. Before getting into specifics, though, you need to make a key decision about how you plan to distribute the syllabus. Because the choice you make determines length and content, the *medium of distribution* for syllabi in your situation is important to know before writing the syllabus. While paper handouts are the common medium,

it is no longer safe or smart to assume that this is the *best* or *only* medium for you and your course.

Increasingly, electronic text transfer has become the norm of professional discourse, and syllabi are no exception. Basically, you need to know whether your institution is one where all students have computer access and reliable electronic mail or file transfer access. In the fairly recent past, how much information you could include in each section of a syllabus was a function of many factors, including constrained photocopy budgets in some departments. *Prior to writing your syllabus, you should determine whether there are limits on how long the document can be, whether it is to be distributed for free or included in a course packet to be purchased, or whether you can simply post it on a departmental electronic bulletin board, gopher site, or World Wide Web homepage for student retrieval via computer prior to the start of class, avoiding the paper duplicating process entirely.* Needless to say, file transfer distribution, as opposed to paper preparation, provides some freedom from length restrictions. Moreover, such a system might well save you the trouble of replacing lost syllabi (and the students the embarrassment of asking for a replacement). And perhaps more importantly, electronic distribution facilitates access among people whose preferred medium is not print, such as visually impaired students who use Braille or voice output.

Having resolved the question of distribution medium, you're ready to build the syllabus.

(1) Background Information

As is the case for writing each of the three sections of a syllabus, how much and what kinds of information you include in the background section will depend on who enrolls in the course and what assumptions you can make about their prior knowledge of the subject matter and

about you personally. Other circumstances might also dictate how you approach this section. *In any event, you can use this section to set a tone for the course, establish your classroom persona, and get across some essential information.*

(a) Instructor information

At a minimum, include the following information about yourself in the text of your syllabus:

- your name and title
- your preferred form of address
- your office location
- information on wheelchair accessibility of your office
- your office hours
- your phone number
- your FAX number
- your TDD number or relay access
- your department's message system (do you have voice mail?)
- your e-mail address
- your mailbox location for delivery of materials
- your full mailing address for U.S. mail or courier service

Keeping in mind that students come back to the syllabus for essential information fairly often, you can use the syllabus text for such seemingly straightforward information to *set a tone that invites inclusivity and which promotes success*. Items included as instructor information can be stated simply as a list of facts. But you might also use this list as a chance to set a tone for

your course. Over the years, I have seen colleagues and graduate teaching assistants do a marvelous job of using this introductory part of the syllabus to set just such an inclusive tone that invites the success of all. Consider how you might approach the following items from the instructor information section. For instance,

Instructor: Jane Doe

tells students who you are. But consider the difference between that short version and this longer possibility:

Course instructor: Professor Jane Doe (I prefer 'Ms. Doe' and will address you as 'Ms.' or 'Mr.' unless you prefer another form of address).

Note that the longer form leaves no doubt about how you wish to be addressed, giving the students explicit cues about how to operate, putting them on secure ground in approaching you. As to use of titles and formal or informal address, you should give some thought to what is most appropriate to your situation. For example, I deliberately ask students to use "Terry" rather than "Dr. Collins" or "Professor Collins" as a preferred form of address. As a very tall white male in middle age, with tenure and full professor rank, I have to work hard to make myself accessible to students. On the other hand, some women with whom I have worked identify themselves quite clearly and deliberately as "Doctor Doe" or "Professor Doe" because they have perceived a need to establish their persona's authority in view of culturally embedded patterns of trivialization of women.

Or, again, consider the very real differences in tone and success-orientation suggested in the following example:

Office hours 8-930 T Th in Old Main 104

This is pretty standard syllabus shorthand. In a limited way, it's clear. But it's also minimal to the point of seeming brusque or incoherent (What *is* "T" to the uninitiated?). Compare it to:

> *Office hours 8:00-9:30 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays in my office, Old Main 104. The wheelchair accessible entrance to Old Main is on the east side.*
> *If you cannot make these hours, you are welcome to see me in class to make an appointment at another time. You can also schedule meetings with me outside of office hours by exchange of e-mail.*
>
> *Please do not see office hours exclusively as a time to address problems with the course. You can use them to clarify points you don't understand, to get additional readings, to talk about the subject matter in relation to your special interests, or to go over work in progress. You don't need a crisis to make productive use of these hours.*

While the shorthand version at the top provides the minimal information *about you*, it doesn't provide the essential information *about the student* in relation to the course that is likely to promote success.

Finally, consider the tonal and content impacts of how you present something as trivial as your phone number:

> *Phone: 555-1234*

versus

> *Phone: 555-1234*
> *The best time to reach me by phone is during office hours, and on Mondays and Wednesdays from 3:00-4:15. The phone rings through to a secretary when I am not in the office, and you can leave a message with him. Be sure to include your name, your*

number, and good times to try to reach you if you would like me to return your call.

(b)Books and materials

Most often, faculty simply list the author, title, and edition of books required for their course. In some cases, that is sufficient—the institution is small or the environment is coherent enough that even the newest of students will know that the sole bookstore on campus has ordered the books. But in other environments, additional information will be needed. Keep in mind that if you teach courses to first-year students, they will have been provided with their books on loan in public high schools, and may therefore have had no prior experience with the process of identifying books for purchase in a campus bookstore. If there is more than one bookstore on campus, you should be explicit as to which one will have stocked books for your course. And you might want to note if the books are available in one of your campus library reserve reading rooms (a good idea if you have doubts about whether all students can afford to purchase all books).

Very often, you will need to list other, non-book essentials. If photocopied course packets are used, be sure to note where students are to purchase them and how they are filed (by course number? by instructor name?). If specific non-text supplies are needed, give students enough information so that they can get the right stuff the first time they try. For instance, if they need safety goggles, give the minimum tolerances and the recommended or required type of materials. If they need computer disks, give the size and density you require. If they need to keep a journal, be explicit about required or preferred size and format or colors of ink you hate to look at. If you have very specific materials which are required and which have been ordered for

purchase, be sure to note where and when they can be purchased. If deposits are required for additional materials or lab breakage, be sure to note that so students know without question what they need to do.

(c) Resources

If you are building a syllabus that promotes student success and have done the background inventories suggested earlier, you will be able to include in your syllabus helpful information on resources available to students and how or when students might access such resources. You should include names, locations, office hours, and a statement about appropriate roles for teaching assistants, if you have them, or you might invite assistants to prepare a separate sheet about themselves in parallel with information you provide about yourself. If your department has a tutorial center, or if there is a campus-wide learning center, you should be explicit about its availability *and* its relationship to and appropriate uses for the course. For instance, it is one thing to write

> *Assistance with course papers and lab write-ups is available in the reading and writing skills center in J. Garcia Hall.*

It is quite another matter to write,

> *Tutors in the reading and writing skills center in J. Garcia Hall have met with me, have gone over the writing assignments for this course and my expectations for those assignments, and are prepared to review drafts or work in progress either in person or via e-mail exchanges.*

As another example, if librarians or specimen curators offer orientation sessions about special

collections relevant to and required for your course, be explicit about when and where such sessions are held and your expectations about student participation in them.

(d) Disability Statement

Colleges and universities, and the faculty who teach in them, are required to provide appropriate reasonable accommodations when they are requested to do so by students with disabilities. On nearly all campuses, there is an office with responsibility for insuring access and assisting in identifying appropriate reasonable accommodations.

More and more, faculty are finding it to be in their best interests and in the best interests of students with disabilities to include in their syllabus a statement about reasonable accommodations. Such statements have the effect of notifying students with disabilities of the channels designated for pursuing accommodations and create an inclusive tone for the course, apparent to all those enrolled. Your institution may have a carefully worded boilerplate statement aimed at legal compliance with regulations. If that's the case, use it. In other instances, you may need to create your own. Consider language such as the following:

> *Students with Disabilities: If you have a disability which requires accommodation in this course, please see me as soon as possible. I am happy to make appropriate accommodations, provided timely notice is received.*
>
> *To receive a copy of this material in alternative formats such as Braille or text file, please contact me immediately. Our system requires 72 hours for these services.*

In addition to these fairly common subdivisions of the background section of a syllabus, some faculty find it useful to state clearly for students the goals and objectives of the course. In

so doing, they disclose the direction they have in mind for the course and give some sense of how the various parts of the course work toward a thoughtful set of outcomes. Moreover, such goals and objectives disclose some of the "insider knowledge" of the organization of learning in disciplines and the perception of coherence among the various discrete items being studied. Other faculty, however, are reluctant to state so explicitly the goals and objectives of a course. To them, such statements seem to foreclose possibilities of discovery and autonomous outcomes among students who bring diverse motivations and aspirations to the course. In general, your decision to include or omit such statements will likely reflect your theory of teaching and the specific situation you find yourself in.

(2) Schedule and Assignments

As is the case for most decisions you make in building your syllabus, how much scheduling to build into the syllabus prior to the start of a course and how much to do after meeting with the class is a function of the complex interaction among institutional characteristics, students' profiles, teaching theory, and course goals. In his widely consulted *Teaching Tips* (Lexington, MA: D.C Heath, 1986), Wilbert J. McKeachie asserts that you'd want to provide a minimal outline of the course. By outlining things only lightly, he claims, you reserve the capacity to be flexible and responsive. This may well be useful advice in many situations where a residential, homogeneous population without outside demands of job and family can be anticipated.

My own experience, however, is the opposite. Students in urban commuter universities, in most community colleges, and, increasingly, in weekend and after-hours programs at small

liberal arts schools won't often welcome or benefit from loosely scheduled situations. In my site, with my students, I've come to see that I need to create a coherent schedule for the course, commit to it, and be explicit in making it available at the very start of the class. For students who work nearly full time, who have young children, whose lives take them away from campus for the majority of their days and nights, success in our challenging courses often depends on their capacity to plan ahead, to schedule precisely, and to manage competing demands. In such a situation, students benefit from getting as much information as they can get as soon as they can get it. They need advance notice of due dates, reading assignments, labs, time spent in groups pursuing collaborative projects, studio requirements, field work, exams, study group meetings. More and more students are attending postsecondary institutions on the fly, making it less and less likely that they can be flexible in response to your mid-term shifts in direction or late announcement of new assignments or requirements.

The nitty-gritty of scheduling assignments and required work in the syllabus lends itself to a kind of thoughtfulness about tone and inclusivity very similar to observations made earlier. You can be clear and thorough in making assignments *and* create at the same time a supportive tone which says, quite directly, that you are serious about student success. Do not confuse this seriousness about student success with mindless coddling or unnecessary caretaking. Rather, think of it as being parallel to what you expect from professionals who interact with you. Which would you prefer to hear from the physician you pay to treat you, for example:

Take two of these brown pills twice a day. Call me next week.

versus

You have some minor inflammation and swelling in the knee, but I don't see signs of

anything more serious. I'm prescribing a seven day supply of a mild anti-inflammatory called "swelldown." You should take two in the morning and two at night. It has no likely side effects, but if they make you tired or irritable, call me and we'll try something else. The swelling should go down over the period of a week, and if you'll take it easy on the knee you should get full relief from the pain by then, too. If the symptoms haven't diminished in seven days, be sure to call. Any questions or other concerns?

Quite naturally, we prefer the fuller, more respectful explanation, and we would be incensed if a physician failed to explain things fully for fear of "coddling" us or "stooping" to over-explanations of what is "completely obvious."

Back in the world of syllabus schedule writing, consider the following scenarios, in which a sample of typical syllabus shorthand is once again contrasted with a more generously elaborated treatment of the same scheduling material:

Feb 22: Read pp. 112-67

versus

Feb 22: Read pp. 112-167.

This is a particularly difficult section on American historiography and theory, followed by application to competing historical representations of the Sand Creek massacre. You may find it most useful to review notes from the lecture on January 30 and pp. 77-91 in the textbook prior to doing this new reading.

Granted, the first take does indeed make clear that students are to have read a certain body of material by a certain date. With it, you will have addressed the minimum of what they have to do. But with the second, you will have accomplished the same goal, with the additional clear

indication that additional time might need to be budgeted to do the work well and that it is especially important that the concept be grasped. The second, in short, invites students to become insiders to the workings of the course.

In scheduling, whether fully elaborated at the very start or provided via bi-weekly handouts, always alert students not only to the daily requirements of reading or problem sets, but also to major due dates, exam dates, lab schedules, studio hours, small animal clinics, and the like, as they are relevant to your course. With the availability of formatting features even on low end word processing software, nearly any faculty member can use highlighting via bolds or shifts in font size or boxes or white space to draw attention to particularly important items on the schedule.

(3) Procedures

In addition to full exposition of what work is to be done in what sequence if a student is to succeed in the course, your syllabus should also spell out as clearly as possible the policies and procedures which guide the course. In creating this part of your syllabus, you will need both to consult institutional regulations and to articulate your own expectations. Once again, if your goal is to promote the success of all students by taking the time to write a disclosive, inclusive syllabus, your section on procedures should set out to dispel any fog that might hold back the progress of those who haven't yet mastered the insider knowledge of college or university operations. Quite conveniently, a syllabus which spells out in detail the procedures under which a course operates will go a long way toward protecting *you* from surprises, too, since clear communication about how things work will minimize complaints that arise from

misunderstandings.

Course policies

As I said at the beginning, academics are very often unable to imagine that someone wouldn't know the unspoken ground rules of academia. Like all closed systems, ours seems perfectly logical and reasonable to those of us who live within it. The result is that many things go unsaid which students need to know, particularly in the area of behavior and performance policies. The following is a sampling of course policies which usually need to be spelled out. In your situation, you will no doubt have others to address in your syllabus (I was surprised to see a weapons policy on a syllabus, for instance, but after a colleague explained it to me, it made sense in the situation). In nearly all cases, your syllabus section on policies should answer the following kinds of questions.

- **Grades**: How do students earn grades in the course? What counts for what portion of a grade? Are all papers, problem sets, labs, studio sessions, quizzes etc. equal? How does a student find out how she's doing? Are materials returned with grades? Are lab scores posted? Who is the final arbiter of contested grades in courses with teaching assistants?
- **Late work**: How do you handle late work? In what circumstances will it be accepted? With what notification? With what documentation?
- ***Attendance:*** Does your college or department have any guidelines on attendance? Have you initiated a policy of your own? Why is attendance important in your course?
- **Academic honesty**: Does your institution have a statement on academic honesty and plagiarism, which both defines unacceptable conduct and states the consequences? If so,

you would do well to reproduce it in, or attach it to, your syllabus so that everyone knows and is operating within the same rules. Do you have additional strictures or policies about academic honesty which apply to your situation?

- ***Classroom climate ground rules***: Increasingly, institutions and individual faculty are finding it necessary to spell out in course syllabi ground rules for individual conduct in classrooms. Such ground rules, usually put in place to protect class members from abusive but not illegal speech or conduct, have caused a great deal of controversy about limits or lack of limits on free speech in classrooms. Do you have such ground rules? Why? Are they yours individually or do they reflect public positions taken by the institution as a whole? How do they apply specifically to the course for which you are preparing a syllabus?
- **Student conduct in general**: All institutions have a *student conduct code* or similar document. In a syllabus section on course policies, it is usually a good idea to anticipate problems related to the student conduct code which might arise in the course, or what areas of the code relevant to your course are *not* likely to be familiar to newcomers—students without "insider knowledge" of academe. Such aspects of the code should be addressed overtly in the syllabus. For instance, if your institution has sexual harassment policies which put in place a standard beyond your local laws, it might be good to note that in relation to collaborative requirements where interdependencies among students are essential to course completion and success. Any number of parallel situations will become apparent with reflection.

Course procedures

Depending on what you teach and how you teach, your syllabus should include a section on procedures which must be followed if students are to succeed in the course. The procedures essentially advise students about operational expectations that are in place to insure their success and well-being in the particular course. In some situations, syllabi sections on procedures are necessary to reduce institutional liability in cases where students are exposed to potentially harmful situations and materials.

In some courses, these procedural issues are minimal—they are no more than friendly reminders that reading is to be completed before class starts or that problem sets are to be done collaboratively or that studios are to be locked after instrumental practice to prevent theft or the like.

In other cases, however, procedures comprise the bulk of the syllabus. In some cases, this is so because faculty have put in place pedagogies which require elaborate procedural guidance because they are unfamiliar to students for whom lecture halls are the norm. For instance, if you are undertaking a shift toward collaborative learning in cooperative groups, you may find it necessary to devote considerable time and effort toward making your syllabus effective in guiding group activity and shared task-specific responsibility. Procedures for operating in collaborative groups in a large course, for instance, would need to be very specific in allocating responsibility and shared effort—it is not very likely that oral instructions would be effective amidst the creative noise of face-to-face collaboration.

In other instances, safety considerations help shape the syllabus section on procedures. In taking inventory prior to writing the syllabus, you would no doubt gather information on this.

The complex interaction among student characteristics, course site, and teaching methods indicate the sorts of things you might need to address as procedures. In some medical and lab situations, this is most obvious, and it is likely that in such situations institutional procedures are codified in a required boilerplate—for example, procedures which must be followed by clinical students when handling blood products or when exposed to body fluids. Similarly, but perhaps not so obviously, lab science and applied engineering courses, some art studio courses, many physical education courses, and others require that you spell out safety procedures. Especially in beginning courses, where novice students are likely to find themselves in situations to which they have no prior exposure, the *tone* of the explanation of procedures can be as important as the content. Again, the goal of explaining such procedures is twofold: first, to insure the safety of the students in our course; second, to help students see themselves in relation to the business of higher education in ways which foster success. For example, consider the following abbreviated and elaborated paired samples. In each case, the safety issue is addressed through statement of a procedure to be followed. But note the tonal differences:

> *NO FOOD and NO DRINKS in the LAB*

versus

> *Eating and drinking are not allowed in the lab. Please do not bring any food or beverages into the lab. We will be working with hazardous materials throughout the term. Eating or drinking during lab puts you and your classmates at increased risk of accident and injury from breakage or toxins. You will be asked to remove any food or beverage you bring into the lab.*

The former appears to be arbitrary, gratuitously forbidding. The latter is no less emphatic, but offers a student-based explanation for a demand that is certainly not made in all classes. Again, consider the following:

> *Appropriate garb is required at all times in the sculpture foundry.*

versus

> *When working or observing in the metal sculpture foundry, you must wear the following safety gear for your protection in the presence of the furnace and molten metals, and to insure consistent safe procedures all around:*
>
> > *Steel toed safety boots*
> >
> > *Leather chaps tied over boot tops*
> >
> > *Leather apron*
> >
> > *Insulated sheathed leather gloves extending not less than eight inches above wrists*
> >
> > *Safety goggles*
> >
> > *Hard hat*
>
> *Except for safety shoes, all items can be checked out in the foundry foyer during the ten minutes prior to the start of each class. You must provide your own boots. You will be required to leave your student i.d. with the foundry assistant when checking out equipment. Students who do not wear appropriate safety gear as listed are not permitted in the foundry. No exceptions.*

In this instance, the contrasting feature is the fullness of the explanation about what constitutes "appropriate garb" in the foundry and where the student can get it. It will produce both a safe

environment and understanding on the students' part of how they can comply—how they can move toward insider knowledge of life in the metal sculpture foundry.

Whether your class requires use of computer networks, map rooms, free exercise weights, preserved animal specimens, microscopes, observation rooms, language tapes, or collaborative groups, your syllabus should spell out the terms of student participation and the procedures through which appropriate participation can be achieved. As noted, these procedures are frequently dictated by others, and your syllabus will simply attach institutionally generated procedural statements. In other instances, you should write your own procedures or add to institutional boilerplate procedures to make them less mean spirited, less gratuitously authoritarian in tone. In either case, keep in mind that while the initial—perhaps even primary—impulse in writing procedures might be to protect institutional property or to reduce institutional liability, the final test is whether your statement of procedures achieves its institutional goal at the same time that it discloses to the students the terms of their own success in your course.

It would be foolish to ascribe to the syllabus for your course more significance than it deserves. A badly taught course with a great syllabus is still a badly taught course. A too-busy student who knows clearly and supportively what is required of her still lives in a world where there's always too much to do. Nonetheless, the syllabus sends a clear—albeit partial, albeit preliminary—message to our students and colleagues about our professional values and about our attitudes toward the students we teach. As a public document, it does indeed serve as a significant figure of our approach to our work.