Reimagining Your Syllabus for Responsiveness:

Aligning Goals, Assessment, and Strategies for Teaching

Let’s Frame Things Up

Using backward design principles we will consider fall course contexts and how the syllabus and course structure can:

- Set expectations
- Build a learning community
- Give students agency
- Assess student learning
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Twitter Handles</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mo Pelzel</strong></td>
<td>Director of Academic Technology</td>
<td>Grinnell College</td>
<td>@MorrisPelzel</td>
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3 Big Things

1. The syllabus
   A reflection of our course structure and philosophy

2. Backward Design
   We start at the end and end at the start

3. Assessment
   Finding out how well we achieved our goal
Workshop Learning Outcomes

Workshop participants will be able to...

● Feel more confident in facing the challenges ahead
● Align learning outcomes, assessments, and instructional approach
● Use the syllabus to accurately signal the kind of course learning environment they want to build
Uncertainty

**uncertain**ty
/nərˈtən(t)ē/  
noun
  the state of being uncertain  
  "times of uncertainty and danger"
  Similar: unpredictability, unreliability, riskiness, chanciness, precariousness
  - something that is uncertain or that causes one to feel uncertain.
  plural noun: uncertainties  
  "financial uncertainties"
  Similar: doubt, qualm, misgiving, apprehension, quandary, dilemma

Disruption

**disruption**  
/dɪsˈrʌpʃ(ə)n/  
noun
  disturbance or problems which interrupt an event, activity, or process.
  "the schedule was planned to minimize disruption"
  Similar: disturbance, disordering, disarrangement, disarranging, interference
Think about your fall courses. What questions, concerns, or anxieties arise?

Reflect: Take notes for 2 minutes.

Share: Type your thoughts in the Zoom chat (if desired).
Where do we go from here?

How Do We.....

- Set expectations
- Build a learning community (foster trust, promote engagement)
- Give students agency (with an eye toward flexibility as an equity principle)
- Assess student learning (different temporal and spatial modalities)

The Syllabus

Backward Design

Assessment
The Syllabus

As a rhetorical act/gesture

As a place to set expectations and establish norms

As a means of promoting student agency and multiple pathways for success
Two Thought Experiments to Begin Reimagining the Syllabus
Syllabus Metaphors

“My syllabus is a ___________________”

Share: Type your thoughts in the Zoom chat.
De-compose your syllabus: the “exploded view”
Arundhati Roy: Pandemic as portal

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.
As we pass through this portal, let’s think about what we might take to the other side, and what we want to leave behind. One or two sentences per question. No more.

1. What one book from class would you want to take with you?
2. What, if anything, from your old life do you want to leave behind?
3. What do you appreciate that you would like to take with you?
4. What change, if any, would you like to see, and commit to bring about, on the other side?
High Trestle Trail Bridge
photo by David V. Johnson
Ideas to Consider

- set a tone of welcome, promise, and radical hospitality
- share the syllabus in an editable and collaborative format; for example, invite students to comment upon and annotate the syllabus as the first assignment of the course
- leave part of the syllabus unfinished, and invite student collaboration to fill in the missing pieces (“skeletal syllabus”)
- be flexible, and give students multiple pathways through the course … include some options about assignments, readings, etc.
For further reading
Tulane University, “Accessible Syllabus”
https://accessiblesyllabus.com
It's that time of the year & we're talking syllabi: How to create or tweak, how to co-design with students, whether or not they're a contract, what purposes they serve & whose voices are included and excluded. Here's a THREAD about ANNOTATING your syllabus with your students 1/10
Jacob Gowell, “Syllabus-as-Metaphor”
https://hybridpedagogy.org/syllabus-metaphor/
Angela Jenks on episode 289 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast.

“Syllabus Resources,” episode of Teaching in Higher Ed podcast
https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/syllabus-resources/
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The Syllabus

Backward Design

Assessment
What is backward design?

How can it promote student engagement and buy-in?

How can it help you organize your course?
What is backward design?

Typical Approach to Designing a Course

- consider the learning activities & resources (how will I teach the content)
- How will I know my students learned anything (developing assessments around the learning activities)
- Last; attempt to draw connections to the learning goals of the course
What is backward design?

Backward Design Approach to Designing a Course

**FIRST:** Consider the learning outcomes of the course

**THEN:** Consider how you’ll know your students know (ASSESSMENT)

**LAST:** Plan and develop HOW you will teach the content
3 Stages of Backward Design

1. Identify desired results. Why does this course exist? (COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES: where do we want to go?)
2. Determine acceptable evidence (ASSESSMENTS: how will we know we’ve arrived?)
3. Plan learning experiences and instruction (CONTENT/INSTRUCTION/ASSIGNMENTS: what will we need to help us get there?)
STAGE ONE: Identify Desired Results

The big WHY? Why does this course exist?

Let’s take 5 minutes:
1. pull out a piece of paper
2. write down in one paragraph: why does this course exist?
Let’s take 5 minutes:

1. pull out a piece of paper
2. write down in one paragraph: why does this course exist?
3. Take a short break if you need to
Next step: Writing Learning Outcomes

So...you basically just started your learning outcomes for this course…

Now narrow it in:
What do we want students to do/apply by the end of the course?
STAGE TWO: Determine acceptable evidence

1. How will I know if students have achieved the desired results?

2. What will I accept as evidence of student understanding and proficiency?
STAGE THREE: Plan learning experiences & instruction

1. What enabling knowledge (facts, concepts, principles) and skills (processes, procedures, strategies) will students need in order to perform effectively and achieve desired results?

2. What activities will equip students with the needed knowledge and skills?

3. What will need to be taught and coached, and how should it best be taught, in light of performance goals?

4. What materials and resources are best suited to accomplish these goals?
What does this look like?

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1.  
2.  
3.  
4.
Why this way of thinking benefits your students

Students **know why** they’re taking this course
You’re tying this specific time and place to the rest of the world:
You’re helping students see how the course relates to REAL life
You are answering the questions: why do we need to know this?
  *Why am I talking this class?*

You’re engaging students in a **FULL PICTURE**.
Backwards Design & the online classroom tips

- Begin work on the final assessment during week one
- Clarify the purpose of class activities & assignments
- Assign tasks that foster self-reflection on learning as it relates to course outcomes
- At end of semester, have students reflect on where they’ve come and what they intend to do to continue
Where do we go from here?

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The Syllabus
Backward Design
Assessment
Assessment Framework

What do we mean by assessment?

How can it be used to facilitate student learning?

How do I choose an assessment strategy?
What do we mean by assessment?

Learning outcomes assessment is an ongoing process designed to monitor and improve student learning. *(Allen)*
How can we use assessment to facilitate student learning?

Assessment provides:

- Information **students** can use to confirm they’re on the right track and/or to understand how they can improve.

- A method for **students** to share perspectives about the learning environment.

- Information **faculty** can use to confirm how well the learning activities they’ve designed helped students meet the learning outcomes and whether adjustments are needed.
We assess to know learning happened

So, what is Learning?
So, what is Learning?

We enter the black box inside our brain...
Learning is invisible
Learning is invisible
Learning is invisible
Make learning visible

Explain

Operationalize the learning

Perform

Create
How do I choose an assessment to represent the learning?

Make learning visible... exiting the brain...

Explain

Perform

Create
How do I choose assessment strategies?

1. Verify that the learning outcome and the “evidence” of student learning are in alignment, then apply teaching strategies to scaffold the learning to the outcome.

2. Clarify the purpose for the assessment

3. Consider the learning context
1. **Align Assessment with Desired Learning Outcome**

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## 2. Clarify the Purpose for Assessment

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<th>Formative</th>
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<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Determine student mastery level</td>
<td>Feedback for student growth and adjusting teaching approach</td>
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<td><strong>Timing</strong></td>
<td>End of a unit; no further practice or growth opportunities are available</td>
<td>Throughout the unit while practice opportunities are available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>Mostly instructor</td>
<td>Student and Instructor</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Risk level</strong></td>
<td>Higher-stakes</td>
<td>Lower-stakes</td>
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When the cook tastes the soup, that’s formative. When the guests taste the soup, that’s summative.

-NSF Handbook for Project Evaluation
3. Consider the contexts

Learner context:
Can every student access and complete the assessment?

Instructor context:
What is my ability to manage the changes in my courses?

Environmental context:
What conditions are likely to be in place during my course?

WAIT! Can I just use grades as my Assessment?

It depends. Usually not. Learning outcome assessment and grading overlap, but they are typically not interchangeable.

**NO:** If your grades include criteria, like timeliness (meeting deadlines), that might not be explicitly connected to the specific learning outcomes

**YES:** If your grading criteria are identical to your learning outcomes.
How this approach to assessment can facilitate student learning

- Aligning assessments with key learning outcomes helps students to focus on what’s most important

- Using low-stakes as well as high stakes assessments provides opportunities for growth and can help to build confident learners

- Taking into account the learning context and identifying equivalent assessment options allows instructors to provide students with a more flexible and equitable learning environment
Wrap Up
• What element of this course do you want to take with you?
• What from previous iterations of this course do you want to leave behind?
  ○ What from previous iterations of this course will you have to leave behind?
• What do you value or appreciate about this course that you would like to take with you?
• What change would you like to see in this course on the other side?

*Spend our final minutes recording individual reflections or thoughts on these questions.*
Formative Assessment

1. What’s your key takeaway from today’s session?

2. What points need further clarification?

For Friday

Take a course you are teaching this fall. Start to think about the course “why” statement and learning outcomes.
### Backwards Design Template

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Link to template: bit.ly/ACM-backward-design-template