Syllabi (re-) design workshop

Most scholars never get trained to develop syllabi and courses which are STUDENT-CENTERED.

Goal of the workshop: to share thoughts, experiences, best practices, and mistakes

Content:

- Backwards design syllabi.
- Connection between goals – which involve our goals, as teachers, students' goals and institutional goals – and evaluations
- Core elements of a comprehensive, student-centered, syllabus.

Introduction

The first question we must ask when thinking about the importance of having a well-designed syllabus is "why this is important at all, from the perspective of teachers and students?".

There are research in place that suggest that

> Teachers with a more informative syllabus got better ratings and were seen to care about how their students learn. (Saville et al. 2010)

> Students perceive well-preparedness and planning as core attributes of a "good professor" (Cruz et al. 2017)

From the students perspective, research – from Saville et al. 2010 - suggest that the syllabus helps students to know in advance what is expected of them and, in turn, it gives them the security of knowing where they are going.

In other words: PRIDICTABILITY.

EXERCISE I:

Designing a new syllabus from scratch:

What is the first step you take in this process?

Think of a course you'd teach, and then try to outline what is the first thing you do, or you would do, when designing a new syllabus.

Again, there is no ONE correct way of doing it, but there is a way that might be more effective and may lead to a more student-centered syllabus.

(Discussion)

What is usually the case is that teachers have a course they are supposed to teach, they then select the topics that must be covered within the course.

A much more effective way of starting the process of designing a syllabus is to do what has been called BACKWARDS DESIGN SYLLABUS.

The basis of backward design syllabi is that your first step when developing a syllabus is to actually look at the last step.

Instead of asking WHAT WILL I TEACH IN THIS PARTICULAR COURSE, or which TOPICS I will cover, we ask: WHAT DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE WITH THIS COURSE?

And by we, I mean we – teachers, we – students, and we – as an institution.

So, in backwards design syllabi method, we ask questions such as

1. What do we want our students to be able to do as a result of their learning in the course?
2. What outcomes do we, as teachers, expect them to achieve?
3. What goals might the students themselves have? (**usually I ask them in the first class, and if relevant, feasible, I make amendments to the syllabus to address their needs and expectations**
4. What does the department expect of us as well? (e.g. liberal arts context, critical thinking, less "classes" and more debates/discussions/inquiries)

<div align="right">(McKeachie 2013)</div>

EXERCISE II:

What I'd like us to do now, is to choose a course you intend to teach, or have taught and try to define and write down your main goals for that course.

What goals do you have as a teacher for that particular course? What goals might students have?

"*in most courses we are concerned about helping our students in a lifelong learning process; we want them to develop interest in further learning and have a base of concepts and skills that will facilitate further learning, thinking, and appreciation.* " (McKeachie 2013, 8)

Just to summarize this part of the workshop… a very common mistake we tend to commit is to mistaken description of the course vs aims.

Description is what the course is about, what will be taught, what will be offered during the course, the aims are what we want to achieve – what we want students to take from the course, what our institution wants to promote.

Here is a good example of a description which does not clearly state the goals:

Course Objectives

The course aims to present the state of art of the debate in the area of diplomacy in theory and practice. This will be done on two levels: i) theoretical and conceptual, and ii) practical and applied. The practical part will be done through simulation of a key international body where students will be required to apply the knowledge learned in class, the rules of procedures of the concrete body, as well as to defend a country's position on a specific topic in the field of international relations. The main aim is to offer the appropriate tools for the professional and academic performance of the students, whether in the area of analysis of international relations and foreign policy or the direct application in the further career (in the State apparatus, the private sector, NGOs, etc.).

This was an introductory course for first year students at Comenius. The syllabus would be much better if I would have stated that the aims are:

- Familiarizing students with the origins of some of the common practices in international relations and diplomacy
- Introducing students to the legal framework guiding the work of diplomats
- Introducing students to the multiplicity of tools and actors acting in the international level.
- Showing how IR can be studied and how international issues are addressed in the diplomatic level.
- Strengthening students public speaking and argumentative skills through their projects' presentation and a final debate (international organization simulation)

EXERCISE IV
Listing down the topics to be cover throughout the semester.

The point here is that, now, we have our course, clearly defined goals, we have the topics we need to cover throughout the semester. We now need to define how we will evaluate students. And here it becomes VERY clear why we NEED to have clearly defined goals.
The goals you set for your course eventually SHOULD determine a lot of what you do in the course, especially in terms of assessment choices.

EXERCISE V
Defining your evaluation criteria based on your goals.
Syllabi checklist: L. Dee Fink (2003)"Designing for Significant Learning Experiences".
- **Overview of the course**

- **Students' learning objectives**

- **Weekly topics**

- **Materials (primary and secondary)**

- **Requirements/Evaluation (connected to the objectives)**

- **Policies**

L. Dee Fink (2003)

"Designing for Significant Learning Experiences"

INITIAL DESIGN PHASE: Build Strong Primary Components

Step 1. Identify important **situational factors**
Step 2. Identify important **learning goals**
Step 3. Formulate appropriate **feedback and assessment procedures**
Step 4. Select effective **teaching/learning activities**
Step 5. Make sure the primary components are **integrated**

INTERMEDIATE DESIGN PHASE: Assemble the Components into a Coherent Whole

Step 6. Create a thematic **structure for the course**
Step 7. Select or create an **instructional strategy**
Step 8. Integrate the course structure and the instructional strategy to create an **overall scheme of learning activities**

FINAL DESIGN PHASE: Finish Important Remaining Tasks

Step 9. Develop the **grading system**
Step 10. De-Bug **possible problems**
Step 11. Write the course **syllabus**
Step 12. Plan an **evaluation** of the course and of your teaching

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Recommended readings:

Gross Davis, B. (2009). Tools for Teaching. 2nd edition. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Lipsky, S. A. (2011). A Training Guide for College Tutors and Peer Educators. Pearson: Boston, MA.

McKeachie, W. J. and M. D. Svinicki (2012). Teaching Tips. 14th edition. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Resnick, M. (2017). Lifelong Kindergarten. The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

Tyler, R. (1949). Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction. The University of Chicago University Press: Chicago.