

# CHANGING THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

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PHIL KING / CREATIVE COMMONS

**O**ur campus teaching center recently invited a brave group of student tutors to share their views on effective teaching with our faculty. The four tutors reported what they had heard from students about course designs and teaching practices that seemed to help, and ones that seemed to interfere with learning. Three recurrent themes in the tutors' remarks caught my attention.

First, they suggested that students needed more help in seeing the large organizational sweep of a course. Undergraduates who came to the tutoring center often had no idea how the first week of the semester in a class connected to the last, or even how different units related to one another. For many students, courses appear less as logical progressions than as, to quote the American writer Elbert Hubbard, "one damn thing after another." So

Vz: fgY XYg][ bg h\ Uha ][ \ hgYYa gc WYUf UbX Y`Y[ Ubhlc i g Ug ZUV `hma Ya VYfgž  
UddUfYbhñžXc bchU`k Umj UddYUf gc `i V\X hc ci f gri XYbhg'

The "learning syllabus." In

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UV]`h]Ygk ci `X ]h\Yd h\Ya XYj Y`cd35H\Y gm`Uvi gôfYdfYgYbhYX Ub ]bj ]hU]cb  
hc UZYUghž[ ]j ]b[ gri XYbHgUghfc b[ gYbgY cZVčbhf c`cj Yf k \Yh\Yf h\Ym  
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8cYgñei f gm`Uvi gcZYZf gri XYbHgUb ]bj ]hU]cb hc Ub ]bhY`YVñ U ZYUgh35fY ñei  
dfca ]g]b[ gri XYbHg h Uhö ]Zh\Ymdi h]b h\Y fYei ]fYX k cf\_ö ñei f Včei fgYk ]`  
\Yd h\Ya [U]b XYYd bYk ]bg][\hg]bhc `]ZY3Cf j Ui UV`Y g\_]`g h Uhk ]` VYbYyh  
h\Ya h\fc i [\ci h h\Y]f WfYfYfg3Cf \_bck `YX[ Y h Uhk ]` YbUV`Y h\Ya hc gi WYX  
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That can happen in different ways. Some faculty members like to plot out the course on the syllabus in great detail, including the topics and readings covered in each class session, the due dates for homework and other assignments, and the dates of all quizzes and examinations. Predicting all of that before a course even begins can be a difficult and time-consuming task, but it does help students envision the whole course from the outset of the semester. And as the tutors explained, that also helps students plan their schedules effectively. Dropping an unexpected exam or assignment date on students midsemester might mean that those who have carefully planned out their studying time around work and extracurriculars now have to rearrange everything in their lives to accommodate your late decision.

Still, in some cases it may be best to leave room for flexibility on a syllabus. Where I live, we have had three vast snowstorms in the past three weeks, each of which entailed a day of class cancellations. Faculty members who had mapped out their schedules in intricate detail are now fumbling a bit. Likewise, faculty members should be flexible enough in their planning to accommodate students' problems or events within or outside of the class.

But aside from the question of how much you want to pin down the dates, the key to this principle is laying out the content of the course in ways that enable students to see the learning arc. Undoubtedly the topics of your course build on one another throughout the semester. Does the course also

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day of the semester.

Be transparent. So much of what we heard from the tutors on the panel, and so much of what I hear from my student advisees, is puzzlement: Why are we doing *this*?

Our tutors reported their bafflement, for example, about how to approach and learn from class discussions. Were they supposed to take notes on what their classmates said? Were they responsible for things their classmates said on exams? How about seemingly casual comments made by the professor during the discussion? Should they write those down?

Students may have such questions about almost everything we do in class: Why do we take quizzes? What's the purpose of these presentations? Why should I have to take a cumulative final exam? Why do you grade participation?

The rationale for all of those decisions might be clear enough in *your* mind, but how often do you answer those questions for your students? If they never hear answers, they might see your course practices and assessments as hoops to jump through or boxes to tick instead of opportunities to learn and improve.

So consider the syllabus as a place to set down in writing the rationale for what you do in the course. The learning syllabus should be a transparent syllabus, a place where your students can find answers to the questions that might arise when they are struggling with a difficult assignment or wondering why they should trudge across a cold snowy campus for a discussion session on a Friday morning.

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