

Ep. 002: Syllabus - The Big Picture

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We often think a syllabus as a contract with our students. But who wants to read through a contract? In this episode, we take a “big picture” perspective of the course syllabus. Discover ways to tap into your students’ natural interest in the course by making the syllabus about them... and not just about the rules and policies of your class.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee and joining me as always is Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: I was getting so expressive, I bumped my microphone as we were doing that, but you know, we're gonna keep it. We're not editing that out. So how are you?

CLAIRE: I'm great. How are you?

JIM: I'm great. And it's, you know, we're recording this at the beginning of August.

CLAIRE: I know it's the most exciting time of the year.

JIM: It really is in some ways. You know, when I was in high school and stuff, this would be like marching band season was getting, you know, all that stuff. And we and even younger, we'd be talking school supplies. Now that I am ostensibly an adult, and I am occasionally teaching courses, including one this fall. I have the S word on my mind. So hopefully we can talk today about syllabus.

CLAIRE: Syllabus. That S word. That's right. Let's do that.

JIM: There are actually a couple of rolling around in there. But I think that's that's the important ones like

CLAIRE: Oh, my goodness, yeah, about to start. Yeah. Yeah.

JIM: So today, we're talking, you know, this is a big topic. And we're probably going to do many podcasts over the years on just on the concept of syllabi. I'm proud to know I know the proper plural for syllabus syllabuses. And so today, we wanted to talk a little bit about what kind of kind of a bigger picture perspective right?

CLAIRE: Yeah, yeah, I think I'm thinking about the syllabus as a rhetorical act.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: Or as a rhetorical document, I guess writing the syllabus is a rhetorical act.

JIM: Now, you know, we may have scared some people by using the R word, which is rhetoric. Because in our culture, of course, rhetoric usually has kind of is kind of a has a kind of a negative connotation. Oh, it's, you know, especially it's empty rhetoric. It's and it's the summer of 2016, we're in the middle of a very interesting political season, which we're not going to comment on, necessarily. But so when we're talking about rhetoric, we're talking about what constructing a convincing argument,

CLAIRE: Right? It's making an argument making a message, sending a message in a way that the people who you want to hear it, can hear it are most likely to hear it and accept it. So that's, that's really what we're talking about. And we talked about, we talked about writing as a rhetorical act in first year composition. You know, it's just a good way of letting people think about writing without saying, Here are strict forms and formulas for how to do this. Instead, we say, hey, think about your audience, the people who you want to read this, the people who you want to reach.

JIM: So you so you see a lot of syllabi in in your role here at CTLT. What's... when you're talking about reaching that audience? What can we do to address that? That, what is the audience? I know.

CLAIRE: I think that's I think that's probably actually a much more confusing thing than we might think. Because really, truly the audience that you should have in mind when you're constructing your syllabus, is your students, the students in the class for whom the syllabus is for which the syllabus has constructed. What I see are, tend to be documents constructed for our peers, other faculty members, sometimes for curriculum committees, which is, that's, you know, that's totally understandable. Because, you know, the first thing you have to do, one of the first things you have to do if you're proposing a course is construct a syllabus. And in that case, you're making an argument to the curriculum committee, that this is a course that should be offered in your department and in your college. But if you just take that syllabus as constructed for the curriculum committee and put it in front of your students, they're going to sense a distance. One of the first things they'll notice is that they are being referred to in the third person rather than the second person. So even though it's ostensibly written for them, it sounds as if it were written about them.

JIM: I see.

CLAIRE: Students will

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: Students should.

JIM: Yes.

CLAIRE: Students are expected to.

JIM: So what do you suggest then that we say use you will do this or you will...

CLAIRE: I would suggest that okay, yes.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: I would suggest that because I would suggest that we think about our students as we're constructing our syllabus, not our colleagues. It's okay if you have a version of your syllabus that you use for curriculum committees. If you think it's important to have a more formal version for your promotion and tenure packet, I wouldn't actually recommend that I would recommend using the syllabus that actually speaks to your students. But you know, there are places where you might feel like you need a more formal version. But I would, I think that your main audience for your syllabus should be your students. And it should, it should be written that way. Another thing that we talked about when we when we talked to developing writers about rhetoric is considering your purpose. And that goes That's so closely aligned with with audience. So if if your purpose is to get a course approved for your curriculum, then your audience is your curriculum committee. And you may you may create the syllabus in that way. But when you take that when you when the course is approved, and you go to teach it, then you need to remember that the people who are going to be reading the syllabus, the people that you want to read the syllabus, because it's in the syllabus, right, those people are your students. And so it becomes a completely different kind of document. Now, some people think that the purpose of a syllabus is to be a contract with the students and some people actually have students sign.

JIM: I'm I'm one of them.

CLAIRE: You are one of them.

JIM: Yes

CLAIRE: And that's, and that's, that's fine. I think that's, I think that's okay. There are other ways to look at it, you could see it essentially as a sales pitch for your course. So this is probably the first course document that students are going to see right, you may be sending it to them in advance, you may be putting in ReggieNet, where they have access to it in advance of the first day. But in that case, it becomes they may see it before they ever see you. And they may use the syllabus to make judgments about you and about your course.

JIM: Well and and I and to me, that's almost a goal because you know, back... I was thinking about this last night, you know, 25 years ago, when I was an undergraduate student. You never saw the syllabus before you saw the instructor because syllabi were only on physical paper, right? So my first day is...

CLAIRE: Which you could lose.

JIM: Yeah, which you can lose. Yeah. And they're hard to read because they were mimeographed or what you know, smelled great, but they smell great. That's right. And now my goal now is to actually make sure that they get that syllabus along with a

welcoming email message from me beforehand, because I don't know if there's an expectation on the students part these days that that happens, but whether whether they expect it or not, I like to have kind of the ground prepared before they come in for that first day of class. So yeah, I think that that's, I think that's

CLAIRE: A great idea. And, you know, Ken Bane talks about the promising syllabus, and which we can talk more about it another time, but, but he says, Your syllabus should be an invitation to a feast, you know, which I love that metaphor, because it just calls to mind this banquet table of amazing options.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Laid out in front of me, you know, and I get to, and they're going to be great people there with me, and there's going to be great conversations, and lively. And it's just, it's such a great image. And it's, it's also an image that actually kind of works well, for a course you know, we want to create a community of learners, we want people to be excited about what the topics that we're addressing. We want people to have options, and to be excited about the options that they see in front of them and be able to sort of pick and choose so yeah, I you know, I think that's I really like that metaphor.

JIM: So talking about the syllabus as a rhetorical exercise. Going past the idea of the curriculum committee, you know, for example, I typically inherit a course an existing course.

CLAIRE: Oh, yeah.

JIM: So whether you're inheriting someone else's syllabus, or you're dusting off that tried and true syllabus that you've used for many semesters, when you try to look at it a new, what's the step by step rhetorical process of actually making that argument?

CLAIRE: Well, I think I think the first thing you want to do is to to get students excited about the course and to understand the why. So there's a great TED Talk by a guy named Simon Sinek. And he's really talking to businesses. And sometimes we'll talk about that I think that would make a great podcast but but he talks about something called the Golden Circle and he says that in the middle of the circle, kind of the Bullseye is why why are why am I doing this? Why do we do this? Why as a as a class, do we do this? Why is it discipline do we do this? He talks of course about why a business does what it does. Sort of the next ring out is how you do it And and the the biggest ring is what what you do? So I kind of think about this in terms of why should your students care about this course. And and Sinek says, the goal is to sort of hit the bull's eye hit that center ring that really, that's what sells people, we we tend to think that what sells people is the what, but it's really the why it's getting to the core of the matter. So I think it's really important for students to know, why should they care about the course? Why do you care about the course? You know, that's something that we, you as the instructor, why do you think it's important? And you know, part of that. Okay, well, you know, you're a guy who majored in communication, right?

JIM: Right. Yeah, this is so...

CLAIRE: Oh, yeah. Well, you know, of course, yeah, of course, he thinks it's important, right. But somebody in Com 110 really needs to be sold on? Why is this important, especially given the level of communication anxiety that, you know, that most students have at the age of 18?

JIM: Yes, exactly. And, and why it's important beyond just the the kind of over arching, I'm coming to college to get a job.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: Because because this is what I'm supposed to do.

CLAIRE: Right

JIM: Sort of thing. So it has to be specific to the, to the subject matter that you're talking about, and specific to their, they have to find that individual connection, within their own their own perspective. And it's connected them as individuals, not just as a certain target population, or certain demographic or whatever,

CLAIRE: Right. And that sort of gets to the how. So the how is, I like to think of it in terms of teaching as how are the students in this course going to be transformed. So a lot of students tend to think of learning as something that they do. It's very short term, they they binge study, on the night before the exam, they cram a lot of stuff into their heads, they come into the exam, or the final presentation, or whatever, and just sort of, it's kind of a mind dump, you know, and then it's gone. But we're in the business of transforming lives, and our courses should be transformative for our students. So that leads to something that CTLT when we talked about course design, we talked about having a transformational goal, what is the transformation that you want to see in your students? How will they be changed? By your course? How will they be different at the end of the semester in ways that mean that they can never be the same person again, that they were when they came when they came into the class. And then cynics outside circle is, is the what. And I'd like to think about that in terms of what are we going to do in this course, that will create this transformation that will make us all different at the end. So you know, that gets down to kind of the nitty gritty, the right learning outcomes, the learning activities, you know, the assessment portions, and so on, and so forth. So all of that, you know, can be can be in your syllabus, and it can all be stated in very in very positive ways, which I think the overall tone is, is hugely important.

JIM: So, do you think it's important within the syllabus to have some sort of statement of your you the instructors teaching philosophy? Or is that getting too much into will students that relate to that, should that be reflected throughout the entire document in some way?

CLAIRE: You know, I kind of hate to say this, and we should talk about this sometime too. But we're getting to a point where all teaching philosophy sort of sound alike. Well, they do don't say there's a lexicon of buzzwords out there, and everybody puts them into their teaching philosophies. I wouldn't say so much there your teaching philosophy as your, your interest in this course. Okay. Your your, your connection to this course.

Okay. Um, I talked to I was working with somebody from the College of Nursing, and this was years ago, I think she's retired. But she was teaching a course in research, nursing in nursing research. And she brought me your syllabus, and it was, you know, a fairly dry document, and she said that her concern about the course was that students just couldn't get excited about research. They weren't they wanted to be nurses, right. And they didn't see any value in a course about research. And she said to me, a huge number 10s of 1000s She said 10s of 1000s of people die every year, because the nursing and medical professions don't keep up with the research. So there are things we know, that could save lives. There are things researchers know, that could save lives, but there are researchers and their practitioners and and if they're not talking to each other, right, then it you know, the research doesn't get into the field. And I was just, I was so blown away by that and said, Wow, that should be in your syllabus. Uh huh. And she said, why? And I said, because that's why this course is really important. And it hits your students where they live, everybody becomes a nurse because she wants to help people or he wants to help people. Um, and so knowing that a failure to stay current with research could in fact, harm people, right is a great motivator for taking this course and learning something about research in the field.

JIM: And and not every instance that we come up with has to be a life or death situation. But there are certainly those that that that critically speak to the reason why students think they're interested in taking the course to begin with, right? And if you can find that little, that little nugget. And sometimes it's very obvious, sometimes it's not sometimes it's not, sometimes it's so obvious that you miss it, then then, you know, stating the obvious can can actually be a benefit there. So one last kind of question, because we're running out of time for this portion, but we are going to continue the syllabus conversation in maybe on a more granular, granular level. Next Next time, you actually use the phrase that we as teachers often hear, hear ourselves, say, or want to say, usually not necessarily with the kind of sentiment behind it. And that is, it's in the syllabus. So even if you go through and you create this grand document that that speaks to individual students and whatnot, I still suspect that at some point during the semester, a student's going to ask you a question, and you're going to want to say

CLAIRE: It's in the syllabus.

JIM: It's in the syllabus. So that's

CLAIRE: all I want to say,

JIM: exactly. So do you have any advice for, for teachers how to deal with that sort of situation? How to deal with that frustration? Do you have do you make an example out of someone once or, you know, what do you what do you what do you do with it?

CLAIRE: I don't I don't make examples. I try and well, I try not to make examples out of people publicly. The you know, the stocks went out of fashion a long time ago. But But I do not hesitate to say to a student who asks a question that's answered in the syllabus. That's in the syllabus. Yeah. Go back. Look at it. Yeah, look, perhaps I'll give them a hint, I'll say look, especially at this section, right. But not always, I'll say you go back and look at

the syllabus. And if you truly can't find it, you bring the syllabus to me, and we'll talk about it. But I rarely have to do that. I mean, I you know, I just, I don't like answering the same question over and over. You know, another option is, people who teach online, have this great tool at their disposal, and it would be available to anybody who's using ReggieNet, or an online teaching tool. And that's a discussion forum. And many people who teach online, create a discussion forum, called course questions or questions about the course. And students are invited to ask that kind of question, to pose that in the forum, and they answer them for each other.

JIM: And you could still look and make sure that they're giving the correct answer. The flip side is,

CLAIRE: you don't want everybody getting this information, right. But, but, so you can, you can keep an eye on that. But more often than not, what you'll find is that you don't have to, you don't have to say anything.

JIM: That's good. Yeah, that's good. I like that idea. So any final thoughts about the philosophy of the syllabus?

CLAIRE: Um, you know, we talked a little bit about tone. And I would say, I would say the most important piece that we haven't talked about, and what we can talk about this a little bit in the next section has to do with the tone of your policies. And I think let's talk about that. Now. I think that's a good place to stop. That's gonna be key to that section.

JIM: That's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology and our website at CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Once you go there, click on the podcast link at the top of the page. You'll find a link to show notes for this episode and links to others. Episodes maybe you haven't listened to yet. So for Claire Lamonica and everyone here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, I'm Jim Gee. Until we talk next time, Happy Teaching.