Course Syllabus and Student Contracts
Craig Stewart
Department of Health and Human Development
Montana State University-Bozeman

It took me almost twenty years of teaching at MSU to figure out that, while students were getting technically smarter, they were regressing in maturity. When I was a student at the University of Texas, students were expected to read a syllabus and follow the directions. If we didn’t, “too bad”. Parents did not call professors and Dean of Students rarely contacted instructors to inquire why ‘little Johnny’ received a ‘D’. However, times have changed. We live in a society where labels are required on electric hair dryers to warn people ‘not to use in a shower’, and we have to be reminded that ‘Coffee in this cup is hot’. In my nearly twenty five years of teaching, students have called the VP of Academic Affairs to complain of final exam times, they have stated with a straight face that they ‘did not realize they had to come to the final’ in order to pass, and it was ‘unfair that I expected them to be able to write a complete sentence on a term paper…… because, after all, they ain’t no English major’.

So, a few years back, not only did I ensure that I met the syllabus requirements of the instructor responsibilities listed in MSU Conduct Guidelines and Grievance Procedures for Students, but also I created a student contract based upon the written agreements I had used as an elementary special education resource room teacher many years ago in Texas. I have found that, while the number of student complainshave not disappeared, they have been significantly reduced, and those who do come to question a grade are handled quickly, but professionally.

“Instructors must state, in writing or by electron means, the course content, objectives and attendance/make up policies (if any). This material must be given (or otherwise made available) to the students at the first or second class meeting.”…… (MSU Academic Responsibilities, etc. p. 1)

It sounds easy enough, but if you were not an education major (and most university professors are not) then it is not as simple as it appears. The creation of a workable syllabus means that you have planned your class and have a specific idea as to what you plan to accomplish, when in the semester you plan to achieve it, and how it will be done. Preplanning, now there’s a concept!

An instructor must also know the level of the student in the class. Lower division students are different than juniors and seniors. Graduate students are much different, hopefully, than undergraduates. I will only give one example of a course syllabus in this document, but will include comments at the end as to how higher division courses may differ. In conclusion, you will see a student grading contract in which students must attest that they have read, understood and agreed to follow the syllabus.
BASIC CLASS SYLLABUS

HDPE 267 is an introductory class required of students in the teaching option of health enhancement, minors in coaching science, and an extremely popular elective for those who want to coach. It is filled with students every semester. The syllabus is posted, as all my classes are, on my website at http://www.montana.edu/craigs/HDPE267.html. My personal WEBSITE has been invaluable for a number of reasons. A student’s dog may eat their paper copy (which I no longer provide), but they can always access the WEB.

The basic format is.....

**TITLE** *(The title in the current catalog.)*

**DAY, TIME & LOCATION** *(I have had students miss class because they forgot the time or location of the class)*

**FACULTY DEMOGRAPHICS**

**NAME**

**OFFICE LOCATION & HOURS**

**E-MAIL** *(I encourage students to communicate this way. A few minutes answering e-mail questions is much more time efficient than 5 minutes per students in the office. I never give home phone numbers)*

**COURSE READING & OTHER REQUIREMENTS** *(I require students to have an e-mail address that they check regularly. I can communicate with them as a class on coming assignments, opportunities for extra credit, etc and get them accustomed to using it regularly.)*

**EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES** *(This is more for you than the student. It serves as a road map for your semester. It forces new faculty members to ‘operationalize’ their thoughts. I, also remind students regularly that, though I might get behind on the lecture/discussions, they are always responsible for the readings.)*

**EVALUATION CRITERIA (GRADING)** *(Very important to the student & to you. Be specific and consistent. This is where a new faculty/teacher can get in trouble. An educator should think this through well in advance of the first class meeting, publish it, and live with it.)*

**SPECIFIC ASSIGNMENT**

% OF GRADE (with breakout as necessary)

OTHER ITEMS THAT WILL AFFECT THEIR GRADE

- in class assignments (attendance policy)... *(Requiring some type of graded, in class assignment related to the topic of the day will encourage attendance without requiring it.)*

- type of exams

  - Comprehensive *(Will cover everything in the semester, including texts, outside readings, guest lectures, etc.).*

  - Open notes.... *(While this appears to be ‘dumbing down’ the content of the class, it does not. It allows me to ensure students read all the material and take notes on it)*
<multi-sensory approach to learning> and gives me a blank check as to what assigned material appears on the final.

CLASS OVERVIEW

Week & date
Readings required / topics
Homework / classwork due
University holidays
Date, time & location of FINAL EXAM (As assigned by the University.)
other

UPPER DIVISION & GRADUATE LEVEL SYLLABII

An example of an upper division class syllabus can be see at http://www.montana.edu/craigs/HDPE445%20syllabus.html, while a graduate on is at http://www.montana.edu/craigs/HDPE506%20syl.html. The formats are basically the same as the lower division, with but a bit more flexibility in the expectations and assignments. It is my experience that students at these levels are more mature and can handle flexible course demands. The graduate class is a seminar-type class in which the students are expected to ‘teach’ much of the content through professional presentations. The requirements of the presentations, however, are very specific from the initial topic to the length of the assignment. The questioning that I provide at the end is intentionally ‘stressful’. The final exam is comprehensive, BUT NOT open notes.

CLASS GRADING CONTRACT & other management tool

A section entitled CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT POLICIES AND PROCEDURES is on the primary page of my WEBSITE (http://www.montana.edu/craigs/). That section, perhaps, is the most important to providing every student continuous access to all of my classroom policies. In addition to the CLASS GRADING CONTRACT, a student has access to my grading policy for all classes, my required formats for abstracts, book reports, oral presentations and research reports.

The grading contract is self-explanatory. The newest addition is the statement that specifies that students be required to do all their work themselves (without assistance from anyone else). <See what I mean about our social changes>. The ‘extra credit policy’ resulted from students opting to do an extra credit task in lieu of a specific assignment.

CONCLUSIONS

The class syllabus is very important to both students and educators. Students have a right to know the content and expectations of every class they attend. The rights of educators, both academic and personal, are just as important as the student’s. The thought and care that goes into a class by a professional educator should not be affected by student satisfaction or preference. Syllabi can be both specific and flexible without negative impacting either individual. My attempts are neither perfect nor complete. Any time I feel I have achieved closure, another student comes in with something along the lines of…

“If I paid a classmate to take my test and he failed, do I get my money back?”