



On the Fly Syllabi

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Students probably had their first chance to ignore a syllabus at the University of Paris in 1241. "Ten Errors Condemned", took a simple approach to the syllabus - do exactly as the master says or go on the rack. It should be noted that in those days a lecturer might lose head his proposing a syllabus that dealt with heretical matters. Fortunately, today, if your educational philosophy doesn't match the Dean's you probably won't be thrown in the pit of darkness. Unfortunately, some syllabi look as though they might have been written there. This little guide is about pinpointing components of the syllabus that have served educators well over the centuries. Rather than send you out on the web (go if you'd like), I have compiled components that have survived the adherence to sectarian methods, traditions, and teachings that were the hallmarks of a typical medieval syllabus and are accepted as vital by most experts in the field today. Included are examples of proto-syllabi from those days to quickly illustrate each concept.

1. An Introduction: Of course we introduce and give a little justification for ourselves, and our interest in the discipline, just as in the words of the most humble Gregory IX to the students at the U of Paris. "...Gregory, the bishop, servant of the servants of God, to his beloved sons, all the masters and students of Paris - greeting and apostolic benediction. I attach great weight to the duty of handing down this priceless treasure to our sons unimpaired by any carelessness on our part." Apostolic benediction may be too strong for your class, but the syllabus remains a great place to make your first contact and connection with the student, and be sure to let them know that your presentations will be unimpaired by any carelessness on your part.

2. A Description of the course: Gregory addresses "constitutions and ordinances regulating the manner and time of lectures and disputations, the costume to be worn, the burial of the dead; and also concerning the bachelors, who are to lecture and at what hours and on what they are to lecture" Notice that the description of the course is mostly procedural nuts and bolts, in this case up to and after a student dies. Philosophical and conceptual descriptions are segregated to sections of the syllabus like the conceptual framework or...

3. The Objectives of the course: A master of chemistries in one of the medieval universities would cover Air, Fire, Earth, and Water. The physiology lecturer's objectives included blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. A Psychology lecturer at the University of Paris intended to cover all the personality traits: the sanguine, the choleric, the melancholic and the phlegmatic (what was with all the phlegm, anyway?). Objectives are a broad, non-specific, soul stirring listing of the adventures students will encounter in the course. The objectives of a course are its sails, not its rudder.

4. Help students assess their readiness: Very simply state what educational or life experience students should have when they come to your course. The 10th century Moorish scholar and teacher Al-Farabi asks that "they (students) should be made to pursue a course of study and form the habits of character from their childhood until each of them reaches maturity, in accordance with the plan described by Plato". If you can't be sure that your students are products of the Plato plan, at least make sure they are well acquainted with the prerequisites your course requires. You might invite them in the syllabus to discuss their readiness with you privately.

5. Place the course in a broader context for learning: P. P. Vergerius the Elder (1370-1444) imagined the humanist context that still drives a liberal view of higher education. "So that it is no light motive to youthful diligence that we thereby provide ourselves with precious advantages against on-coming age, a spring of interest for a leisured life, a recreation for a busy one. Consider the necessity of the literary art to one immersed in reading and speculation: and its importance to one absorbed in affairs. To be able to speak and write with elegance is no slight advantage in negotiation, whether in public or private concerns."

Any more, not many folks take a course to become well rounded, but there are other less expansive contexts you could probably think of; money, power, career security or even just good old fashioned intellectual stimulation.

6. Provide a conceptual framework - P.P. goes on to say, "We come now to the consideration of the various subjects which may rightly be included under the name of "Liberal Studies." Amongst these I accord the first place to History, on grounds both of its attractiveness and of its utility, qualities which appeal equally to the scholar and to the statesman. Next in importance ranks Moral Philosophy, which indeed is, in a peculiar sense, a "Liberal Art," in that its purpose is to teach men the secret of true freedom. History, then, gives us the concrete examples of the precepts inculcated by philosophy. The one shows what men should do, the other what men have said and done in the past, and what practical lessons we may draw therefrom for the present day. I would indicate as the third main branch of study, Eloquence, which indeed holds a place of distinction amongst the refined Arts. By philosophy we learn the essential truth of things, which by eloquence we so exhibit in orderly adornment as to bring conviction to differing minds. And history provides the light of experienced cumulative wisdom fit to supplement the force of reason and the persuasion of eloquence. For we allow that soundness of judgment, wisdom of speech, integrity of conduct are the marks of a truly liberal temper." Again, pretty expansive, but students do need to know how it all fits together and why. Students are rightfully skittish of a pile of facts and formulas and philosophies that don't seem to transcend layers of meaning in a fractal sort of way. The syllabus is a natural place to begin to make those connections.

7. What are the texts and resources? - Stephen of Canterbury: offered a Course in Theology in 1271 that included the following texts. "The names of the books are as follows: the Bible complete with a glossary. Also, Genesis and Exodus, glossed, in one volume. Also, the books of Solomon, glossed, in one volume. Also, Exodus, glossed by itself. Also, Job, glossed by itself. Also, Ezekiel, glossed by itself. Also, the Gospels, glossed by themselves, in one volume. Also, the psalter, with a complete glossary. Also, the four books of Sentences [of Peter Lombard]. Also, the books of Numbers. Also, Joshua, Judith, Ruth, Deuteronomy, glossed, in one volume. Also, the four books of Kings, Chronicles, first and second. Also, Esdras, first and second of Maccabees, Amos, glossed, in one volume. Also, the Twelve Prophets, glossed, in one volume. Also, the Psalter, glossed and complete. Also, the Epistles of Paul, glossed. Also, the Psalter, glossed and complete. Also, the Scholastic Histories. [probably the Scholastic history of Peter le Mangeur] Also the four Gospels, glossed. Also, the Epistles of Paul, glossed, with a smaller glossary. Also, the Psalter, glossed and complete. Also, the first and second books of Maccabees, glossed as far as the tenth chapter. Also, the Gospel of Mark. The Gospels, glossed." This bibliography was intended for a season of study, but like a modern syllabus it listed books chronologically that were to be read. It also didn't offer dates to finish each reading, which should be left to the lecture.

8. Course policies then and now deal with the day to day procedure and rules governing your class. If you don't include your rules and procedures in the syllabus you confuse students and open yourself up to charges of bias that you cannot defend against. Here are some of the course policies recorded at the University of Paris in 1215 "If any one of the students in arts or theology dies, half of the bachelors are to go the funeral, and the other half to the next funeral. They are not to withdraw until the burial is completed, unless they have some good reason. If any master of arts or theology dies, all the bachelors are to be present at the vigils, each one is to read the psalter or have it read. Each one is to remain in the church, where the vigils are celebrated, until

midnight or later, unless prevented by some good reason. On the day when the master is buried, no one is to lecture or dispute.” See the problem? If one of your students was to present on the day of your funeral, how could you later defend dropping the student’s grade, unless that policy was clearly set forth in the syllabus.

9. Provide a Calendar - Make it specific, but give yourself an escape clause to take care of scheduling gremlins like techno-bloopers, a guest speaker’s illness, and so on. Notice that in the example given from the 12th century in “The Statutes Ordained by Richard Duke of Gloucester” there is included a little elbow room for changes in feast days, sickness, and the vagaries of overriding administrative schedules.

“... and yat matyns begyn daily, frome the fest of ye Annunciacion of our Blissed Lady unto Michaelmesse, at sex of ye clok in ye mornyng, and frome Michaelmesse unto ye saide fest of Annunciacion, to begyn matyns at sevene of ye clok in ye mornyng, which done I woll yat prime and houres incontynent y’ after daily be saide in the highe quere by the prest, yat for ye woke shal be Ebdomadarie, and the prest the woke yan next folowing shalbe Ebdomadarie; and yat ye saide prest Ebdomadarie kepe the charge for his woke of begynnyng and ending of matyns, prime, houres, high messe, evenesong, complyn, and oy’ observances, enlesse y’ fall principall fest or festes or the day of obytte of me or my said wiff in yat woke; which if eny such fall I woll yat it be begon and ended by ye saide deane, if he be present, and by none oder, withoute sekenesse or oy’ cause lawfull lett hyme; and yat daily after matyns be said ye anthem of Libera nos be songen descant, or fabourden, with a versicle...” Is your calendar as clear and concise as the example?

10. Evaluation - What method will you use to evaluate your students? - In many medieval universities, evaluation came through a series of disputations. Sophista learned the demolition of the adversary’s arguments in sophismata disputations. Six “passive” years of lecture were followed by two “active” years of disputation and dispute. To receive the bachelor of arts, the student then had to pass three stages: disputations before Christmas; examinations before a jury composed of masters; and disputations under the auspices of the master. Unfortunately, that kind of organic and rigorous evaluation is history. How can students begin to look beyond “finals” if they tend to see a grade as the conclusion of thought? How can we regain the wholeness and dynamism of the scholastic evaluation and put those characteristics to work in today’s increasingly fragmented and fast paced curriculum? L.S. Vygotsky’s *Mind in Society: The Development of the Higher Psychological Processes*, examines the theory and practice of evaluation. He describes an evaluation not of what our students know but of what they are capable of knowing, an evaluation that will then begin to be propulsive in the learning process.

There they are. The foolproof top ten all time favorite syllabus components. Not a bad place to start your syllabus.