



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Syllabus creation

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

February 09, 2016

Tags: student learning goals | syllabus construction | course design

To teach is to create worlds. Worlds known and unknown, worlds that we will visit and be visited by, worlds that will haunt us. Worlds that we hope students will engage in many ways. Worlds that hopefully will show the ways in which their own worlds are constituted so they can critically re-constitute them in some way or another.

To create a syllabus is to invent a world. Even required classes are invented worlds, made by those who think that these are the worlds students need to be part of so they can talk about and work in them. To create a syllabus is like drawing a map, a map of a territory, hopefully drawn with points of arrival and departure, places known and unknown. However, any territory has always been a place taken by somebody, drawn by somebody, and our task is to engage those territories and all the power dynamics and capital invested in them. Any syllabus is a country requiring passports for entry. The final grade is the final visa to enter into a new territory (outside of the classroom's world).

I received my first lesson in maps at the Bossey Institute (Celigny, Switzerland), a fantastic center run by the World Council of Churches. One day, an educator came to talk to us and turned the map of the world upside down. He twisted the center of the globe and played with categories of north and south, center and periphery. At that moment I learned that maps were geographical political inventions.

It is with this same suspicion that I approach syllabi. Who makes those maps? With

what intention are they drawn? What are the ideological lines assumed and left by that



course/map on that theologian, that practice? Whose voices (made present in the readings) are advocating for this map; who is being invited to participate in it- i.e., be a citizen of that course/country? Which histories and issues and peoples are we considering? From what place and with what people do we begin?

I usually teach classes composed of white students. However, when I first had a classroom in which most of the students were minorities, something made me realize that I couldn't keep the same drawings of the map. Not many of those students were represented; it was not their own world. I then realized how stuck I was in what the academy considered the proper drawing of maps, in assumptions about a certain territory/people, which/who was considered official/proper knowledge.

I realized I had to change everything: the lines of the map, the content of the territory and the people who would speak from and about this new world. It was painful! I was lost and fearful that this new map, this new drawing of this new map/world, wouldn't function well, that the new borders of this new land were not strong/porous enough and could be dismantled way too easily. It was my most anxious semester teaching. Since a definitive change had occurred in the seminary's demographics, I asked my faculty the following question: We have a new contingency of students, which means a new world; shouldn't we radically change the themes and the syllabi/maps of our courses? What we have in place won't work with this new people!

I have tried to build syllabi with students. One way I do this is by preparing the whole syllabus and then saying that half of it needs to be here, but the other half can be changed, completely changed. Not only that, but we may need to change things along the way. One time I also decided not to say exactly how the grades would be given, but told the students not to worry about grades. In all these instances, the trajectory was almost the same: at first they loved the idea, but didn't exactly know what to offer. But the anxiety was too great. It didn't work. It seems that we are so stuck in one format of syllabus/learning that we cannot think and engage knowledge differently. We are so wired into "receiving" a specific kind of knowledge that we can't move beyond that and we don't know what to offer critically. We want everything to be so controlled and known that we cannot deal with the dizziness of an uncertain trajectory. Instead of trusting each other to draw this new map using the power we have, we put all of our trust (power) in the teacher, who knows all: how to draw the map, who are its intended citizens, and what kind of stamp the student has to receive.

Every syllabus is a collection of wisdom, a public square where many people pass through speaking and listening, sometimes shouting. We must learn to create syllabi with students. That is my hope, to one day get together with students and ask, "What do we want to teach each other?" And work from our own strength.

Syllabi are not reassurances of what we already know. Instead, syllabi are new sites of rediscovery, opening us up to new aspects of our own and somebody else's histories and borderlands.

Syllabi are amazing tools to let the margins speak! Natives! Blacks! Asians! Latinos! And yes, whites too! Syllabi as sites of knowledge that come not only from Europe, but also from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and from Native ways of knowing.

Syllabi are ways of shaping the world together! Ways of knowing, of living, of figuring ourselves to ourselves in the world and to the world. Syllabi are ways of colonizing, being colonized or trying to wrestle against colonization.

Give me your syllabus and I will tell you how you teach, where and with whom you belong, what ideology you hold, and what you truly believe!

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/02/syllabus-creation/>