



Designing a Motivational Syllabus: Creating a Learning Path for Student Engagement

Harrington, Christine; Thomas, Melissa
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Book Review

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This book helps teachers think through the many functions and possibilities of the course syllabus, particularly as seen through the eyes of students. The authors advise thinking of the syllabus as a motivational tool rather than a punishing list of policies or a repository for contractual language; moreover, they suggest embedding more visual tools and images as well as more explicit rationales for assignments, even down to the individual class level. All of what they propose seems simple and reasonable, even for busy faculty. The authors clearly aim to help faculty see the excitement of creating “a course design tool that maps out the learning path for students” (19), and their suggestions will prove most useful to those beginning teaching who want to break out of the graduate school reading list mode and to those further on in careers, particularly those who might have changed (or want to change) their teaching strategies.

Harrington and Thomas write in an accessible and encouraging style throughout. After a brief consideration of the history and purpose of the syllabus in Chapter 1, they address the following issues in turn: applying course design principles with an emphasis on backward design; key components of any syllabus; policies and other boilerplate; issues of design; techniques for getting feedback and evaluating the syllabus; and ways of using the syllabus beyond its traditional roles. They helpfully include a sample syllabus as well as a syllabus checklist and sample grading rubrics. They lay out the main types of syllabi (coverage-based and activity-based) and argue for the superiority of a backward design that works from goals for students rather than from content or activities. They also champion Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning over Bloom’s, a distinction without a difference to readers who steer clear of learning taxonomies.

Many of the suggestions here seem more suited to a quick tutorial than a full-length book, particularly for seasoned faculty. But the biggest surprise is that this book scarcely addresses online learning management systems, an essential part of many courses that has, in some cases, completely replaced the single-document syllabus. Omitting this technology leaves a huge gap. This book would be greatly improved with a consideration of how the purpose and form of the syllabus has changed with the rise of learning management systems and how the principles described here apply to syllabus design in that context.

Harrington and Thomas rightly see the syllabus as a document that communicates expectations while explaining why the work of the course matters. Much of their focus is on tone and balance: even subtle changes in language and a careful curation of policies, such as those related to student behavior in class, can pay dividends in making students feel more positive and motivated to take on the work of the course. Although this book is not specific in any way to religious studies or theology, any teacher can benefit from a reminder of ways to improve this most standard of course materials.

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