Use an Annotated Syllabus to Track Your Thinking About Course Design Issues

Annotated syllabi are artifacts that begin with a simple course syllabus and then grow in scope and in depth as instructors add annotations and links to additional materials. How can they be useful to us? The annotated syllabus is an ideal format for prompting and tracking the reflection that is part of course design, and it can be used as well to make public the intellectual work that goes into teaching, just as a course portfolio does. But there are also more immediate and tangible benefits that come from keeping an annotated syllabus.

It is not uncommon during the middle of the semester to realize that there are small changes that we can make, or maybe altogether better ways to design an assignment or an in-class learning activity. It may be too late at those moments to implement the change during that same term, but we want to be sure to capture for the next time we teach the class not only what the precise change is, but also what our rationale for the change is. An annotated syllabus can be the living document that allows you to track your ideas, impressions, or observations about course design.

Annotated syllabi, likewise, can provide entry points in which to “dig down” and excavate your assumptions about course design, where you ask questions like “is this textbook really accomplishing what I want from it?” or “does my policy about class participation motivate students to give their best?” or “is my grading rubric as clear as it can be about different levels of performance?”

One of the great advantages of an annotated syllabus is that there are no prescriptive prompts—each annotated syllabus is unique in the direction it takes. You simply annotate where you have questions, where you are considering changes, where you want to explain the scholarly thinking that informed an aspect of your course design, or where you want to assess how well students are achieving a desired outcome. Peer collaboration within groups can magnify the benefits of working on annotated syllabi. Groups allow us, for example, to ask one another questions that might not otherwise occur to the instructor working alone: “why does this rule exist in your classroom?”; “why did you select these materials for your students?”; “why did you include or not include this language in your syllabus?” At Metro State, we have worked very successfully in faculty learning communities to share this kind of feedback over annotated syllabi.

If you choose to work alone on annotating your syllabus, consider reading a book about instructional improvement or course design that could serve to prompt your own questioning about instructional choices. Some titles that can serve that purpose well are:

- Ken Bain (2004) *What the Best College Teachers Do*
- Donald Finkel (2000) *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*
- Maryellen Weimer (2010) *Inspired College Teaching*

To begin your annotated syllabus, you can save your syllabus in Word under a different file name and then use the “comments” feature under the “Review” tab to begin adding annotations. Or, to be able to access your annotated syllabus from any computer—and perhaps eventually to make it public—use Google Docs or a Wiki such as PBWorks (http://pbworks.com/). Wikis allow you to add endless depth to your annotated syllabi!


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