

Envisioning the Radical Syllabus: A Critical Approach to Classroom Culture, Part 2

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January 20, 2015 / [Adam Heidebrink-Bruno](#)

This piece is a follow-up and response to [“Syllabus as Manifesto: A Critical Approach to Classroom Culture.”](#)

There is [a fear](#) among University educators that the students they have received are damaged goods. Frustrations are vented frequently in the faculty and graduate lounges about the student who [avoids homework](#), and the one who [never does the reading](#). It's far too easy to complain about the students who are products of mediocre high schools and are [grossly unprepared](#) for the rigors of academia. But [labels are terribly powerful](#). We must not give in. We must resist the urge to label a student, and we must destroy the very foundations upon which that urge is built.

Classrooms are an experiment too. Whether one wants to or not, each semester educators are asked to define what “student” and “teacher” means in the context of their course. This is done for the first time on the class syllabus. For many, this is a routine task that is often dreaded or regarded as mundane, frequently completed with help from templates and requirements being handed down from administrative teams. But a close, critical look at your syllabus will reveal more than an attendance policy and reading list.

Today's syllabi presuppose students are a certain way. A standard syllabus lists a number of policies, grading information, and learning objectives the student ought to accomplish during the course. Such a syllabus suggests that students should fulfill some predetermined role where one must fit the mold of the syllabus to succeed, or deviate from it and suffer the consequences. In effect, then, it is simply not true that our students are reductionists or instrumentalists, seeing the class only as a bureaucratic stepping stone towards graduation. It is the incessant reminder students see in reading the same syllabus, over and over, for a decade of education.

In short: an individual's mind can grow only in proportion to the cage in which it is kept. And the syllabus is a very small cage.

Let us change these presuppositions. Or better yet, let's get rid of them all together. Let the students act and learn as diversely as they truly are. Last semester, I [proposed a new type of syllabus](#), one inspired by anarchist values such as freedom, autonomy, and responsibility. I suggested the syllabus is a manifesto, a space where one proclaims the aims and values of the classroom. After all, isn't it?

So let us begin again: [Rancière argues](#) that democracy cannot emerge from a state of harmful, hierarchical presuppositions. Engaged and meaningful democracy is, instead, the result of “the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone.” By extension, then, engaged and meaningful education must revise its underlying principles. It is precisely the democratic qualities of “equality of anyone and everyone” that I am arguing for in the founding document of the classroom, the syllabus. Still, to have it envisioned in writing alone is not enough. It must be enacted, embodied.

The syllabus is a symbolic edifice, a monument to the standard of bureaucratic learning. Ignoring it is not enough, as the presuppositions would still be there guiding student behavior with an invisible hand. It stands as a symbol, a representation of what behaviors and mentalities are expected in the classroom. Instead, teachers must deconstruct their syllabi, recreate them, until — if enough educators take action — a new symbolic meaning is invested in document. And as V, from *V for Vendetta*, [once said](#)

“the building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people. Alone a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people blowing up a building can change the world.”

Let us change the world by rebuilding the syllabus to stand for equality, mutual respect, responsibility, and freedom.

This is, of course, a bit idealistic. The [intentions of critical pedagogy](#) are often complicated by the realities of situation. It is likely that students will enter a classroom expecting (and even in some cases demanding) the traditional, top-down educative experience that one might describe as Freire’s Banking Model. For many, this is all that they know: attend class, absorb information, take tests, and carry on. It is the actions they have been told to perform to grant them access to a productive and financially stable life. And this is sometimes true, but only for a privileged few and the [occasional exception who is immediately tokenized](#) to reinforce the mythos of the American Dream.

Do not give in to the pressure to maintain a *status quo* education because some students expect a certain form of teaching-and-learning or because policies are in place that support this model. As [bell hooks reminds us](#), “using liberatory discourse is not enough if we ultimately fall back on the banking system.” And the foundations for the banking system itself are deeply embedded into the design of the syllabus. Without a radical redesign of the syllabus, professors will be prone to profess, and students, study. I’d much rather see a classroom full of learners learning.

When I ask others to envision a radically new syllabus, what I am really asking is for their assistance in resisting the dominant education paradigm. And this is painful, for teacher and student alike. A teacher might receive pushback from students who are used to being told exactly what to do, warnings from their supervisors, exclusion from fellow teachers. Students may begin to see their families, friends, and even themselves in a new, critical light. These are painful experiences, and as hooks observes, there is always “some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches.” She suggests that teachers must “talk about the discomfort it can cause” within the classroom. If not, a deeper attachment to the old ways may be the result. The words will hurt and in an act of self-preservation, the student will be well-justified in “not reading the assignment” because the teacher was not reading the fear, pains, and realities of the student perspective.

There is no protected space on a syllabus to talk about the pain involved in transformative education. A true act of teacher courage is including it anyways, not because one has to, but because a radically different syllabus is an attempt at shifting teaching-and-learning paradigms. A syllabus should be written with care and compassion, knowing that it could, if written honestly, cause pain and disruption to old thought patterns. Worse still, it could reinforce the Banking Model of education. It is better to cause the disruption that leads to new paradigms return to the old methods. As [William Faulkner once said](#) in not an entirely different context “I refuse to accept this.” We, too, should refuse to accept this.

We cannot design liberatory classrooms if the syllabus remains a space dominated by harmful presuppositions. Even if we, in our teaching practices, distance ourselves from the regulatory measures listed on the page, it is still there, ever present, presiding over the space, threatening to recapture those liberated spirits and regain control of the educative environment. To say that, in building classroom culture, we need a list of rules (do this, don’t do this) reinforces systems of domination and control. And by beginning from a location of domination, we deny ourselves and students the possibility of liberation.

Harmful presuppositions in syllabi and teaching practices will further perpetuate class, race, gender, and ableist disparities. But there is language we can use and decisions we can make to challenge these disparities and design for a transformative learning culture. It begins with exchanging generic verbiage for intentional, compassionate language. Bluestockings, an activist bookstore and education center in New York [redefines what a safe, learning environment looks like](#). The learning culture promoted within this space begins from radically different presuppositions, encouraging the autonomy, openness, and compassion of its community members. Likewise, [the example syllabus](#) which ends my previous post on the subject strives for the same effect, working towards an alternative culture embodying Rancière’s presupposition of equality.

The teaching-and-learning I aspire towards comes from a long line of critical pedagogues. It champions local, intimate connections between teachers and students. It bridges theory and action. It promotes the values of autonomy, critical engagement, and direct participation. The teaching-and-learning I aspire towards isn't even really *education*, per se, as that term has become synonymous with structured discipline or even at times a perverse pseudonym for *enculturation*. A liberatory teaching practice begins with an intentional, responsive framework, which I have located and outlined in the syllabus. But a liberatory teaching practice is expansive; it cannot be contained by a single document, however intricate, however thoughtful. But it is a great place to start.

A radically new syllabus reconsiders how we speak about our students. They are not damaged goods, or lazy, or predisposed to not doing homework. They do not only attend college to get a degree (even if sometimes they say so). And they certainly do not only turn in assignments to receive a grade. We must begin by critiquing our own syllabi, acknowledging what they say about teaching-and-learning, how these documents define our teaching and students' learning. We must begin again, teachers and students alike. For it is only together that we may arrive at the presupposition of equality for anyone and everyone.

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