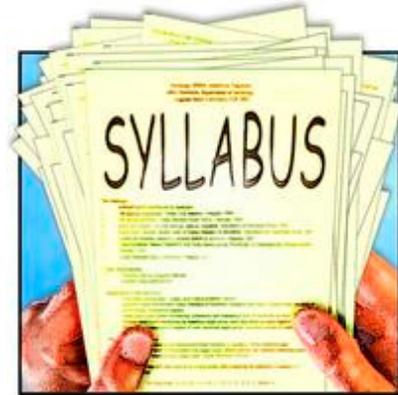


## Start Modeling Dialogue Education in Your Syllabus

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Bringing Dialogue Education into higher education may not be as difficult as you think. College and university settings are often seen as rooted in tradition and academic expectations. Indeed, I have experienced the unspoken understanding that one does not challenge the traditional lecture mode of information transmission. From the continued lack of training of professors in teaching and learning, it is also clear that most educational institutions do not see the need for professional growth in this area. The axiom “We teach the way we’ve been taught,” provides insight into the staying power of the traditional style. However, Dialogue Education is slowly transforming many college and university classrooms. In most places, it is happening one individual at a time.



For the courageous university educators who care enough to learn how to teach and who have discovered the skills, knowledge and attitudes behind Dialogue Education, I offer this advice: *model a different paradigm starting with the syllabus.*

### What does your syllabus tell students?

The syllabus is the first thing students and the administration see of your course. It sets the tone and can tell students a great deal: what the focus will be of the course; how they will be assessed; what books will be used; and, what the required assignments will be. Most often a syllabus gives basic practical information on how to pass a course and little more. What would happen if a syllabus was seen as a tool to *start engagement* in the topic; *inform students of their choices* of content and assignments; *show relevance and importance* to their lives; and, *assure them they will be shown respect with safety embedded* in the way the course is set up? How would or should a syllabus look if its writer was a Dialogue Education practitioner?

### What would a Dialogue Education practitioner’s syllabus look like?

First, if you teach differently than everyone else your syllabus should also look different from everyone else’s. Many elements are critical for students to know, but there are other elements that you can add and language you can use to model Dialogue Education in your syllabi. For example, how about including the first five or six steps of planning that Jane Vella discusses in *Learning to Listen Learning to Teach* (2002) and that Global Learning Partners teaches in their course of the same name.

#### WHO:

The name of the university, course, professor, and any relevant information about the students and teacher(s), teaching assistant or guest speaker(s).



**WHY:**

The reason or rationale of the course; what called for the existence of this course in the program; and, what relevance does it have for students, the teacher and/or the university.

**WHEN:**

The starting and finishing date; the starting and finishing time; the break if there is one; the due dates for all assignments; and, times you are available.

**WHERE:**

Contact information for you and your TA (if you have one); location of the class room; and, location of your office.

**WHAT and/or WHAT FOR:**

The content that will be taught and/or the achievement-based objectives.

(The **HOW** or learning tasks would be reserved for the class time.)

What you title these sections is not important. What is critical is that they are represented.

In addition to the first six steps of design, consider including a combination of the following in your syllabus:

- the ways students will be assessed i.e. self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher assessment
- how everyone's learning styles and multiple intelligences will be respected and valued
- the places in the list of assignments or readings where there will be choice i.e. "Choose between a traditional or non-traditional research paper. Describe and justify your choice"
- the percentage of the grade allocated for participation i.e. 15% will tell the students how important it is to be in class and to participate
- classroom arrangement i.e. "We will work in 5 table groups to allow for group work, discussion and small group teaching."
- teaching methodology i.e. "I will practice the teaching methodology Dialogue Education. This is a methodology that ...."
- value or weight placed on each assignment.

These are a few ways to inform students that the principles and practices of Dialogue Education will be practiced in the course. By including these elements and more in the syllabus, you are working to help students feel engaged in the content of the course, know they will have choices, be assured of the relevance and importance of the course, and be assured that they will be respected and feel safe to explore the new content. You are also saying a great deal about how you see your role as teacher and their role as student.

**Why would you want a syllabus like this?**

You may still be wondering why you would want to have a syllabus that reflects you as a Dialogue Educator. For me the most important reason is to *practice transparency, congruence* and *singularity*. Beside the important reasons named earlier in this article, it is critical to let students know how the course and the class periods will run (*transparency*). We also need to model what we know is the best way to teach and learn, in all aspects of our course and work (*congruence*). *Singularity* will tell students that each of them is absolutely unique and will receive personal attention – they are each persons of incomparable worth. Students should be able to see from the syllabus that this course will be one based on respect, connectedness, relevance and equality. After reading your syllabus they should know you care about their learning and you care about them as individuals.

I started this article saying, “Bringing Dialogue Education into the university is not as difficult as many people think.” However, since many of us are working on institutional change *on our own*, we need to be clear about why we do what we do and how it affects learning. This includes articulating this in our syllabus.