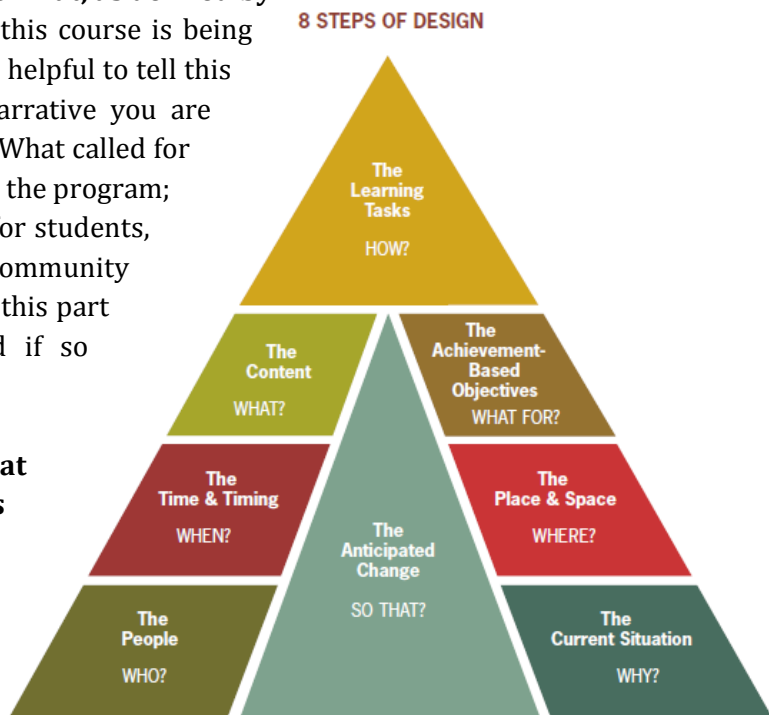# Dialogue Education in the University: Starting with the Syllabus

by Jeanette Romkema and Dan Haase

NOTE*: These tips were written with the undergraduate professor and students in face-to-face full-time learning environment in mind. However, they can be equally valuable in the post-graduate, virtual learning environment, distance learning, and part-time university program setting.*

Modeling Dialogue Education in your syllabus is an important first step in fostering an environment centered on learning and the learner. The syllabus is the first thing most students and the administration will see of your course. It sets the tone and tells students: what the focus of the course will be; how they will be assessed; what readings will be used; and, what the required assignments will be. Sometimes a syllabus gives only basic practical information on how to pass a course and little more. What would happen if a syllabus were seen as a tool to start engaging students with the topic? How would a syllabus look if it were written in light of the steps of design, as taught by Global Learning Partners?

1. **THE PEOPLE: What do I know about all the people connected to my course?** Describe the typical students in this course. What is it about these individuals that is important to consider and name in this course, and how do these people affect the course content and learning design? Also, include information about the instructor and relevant institutional relationships, guest speakers, teaching assistants, and other people or groups connected with the course. Share your assessment with the learners and invite them to further complete the picture.

2. **THE SITUATION: Who needs what, as defined by whom?** Identify the reason this course is being offered at this time. It can be helpful to tell this *like a story* - what is the narrative you are inviting these students into? What called for the existence of this course in the program; what relevance does it have for students, the teacher, the university, community and/or world at this time? Is this part of a series of courses, and if so where is this course located?

8 STEPS OF DESIGN

3. **THE DESIRED CHANGE: What difference do you hope this course will make?** Often a sub-point of the WHY (#2); here you name the *indicators of change* given the limitations

and resources the learners may face. These changes may be cognitive, behavioural, or attitudinal, and may vary from person to person. The changes should be observable and highlight the impact the course will make (i.e. for a course on finances: we expect students will use a personal budget for their personal finances; for a course on children's literature: we expect students will use criteria for selecting new books for their library; for a course on political science: we hope students will know the value of reading world news from multiple sources inside and outside their own country).

4. **THE TIME AND TIMING: What should you consider about the timing of this event to best engage the learners in the course?** Communicate the starting and finishing date; how breaks will be utilized; the proposed due dates for all assignments; times you are available; the total amount of classroom learning time; and, other important timing details. Since time and timing is often connected to respect and safety, it is recommended to clearly state the consequences for late assignments, tardiness and the like.

5. **THE PLACE AND SPACE: What do I know about the location that will make a difference in the learning design?** Although a direct answer to this question may not be located in the actual syllabus it is an important factor for the instructor to consider (note: every space offers its own unique enhancements and limitations for learning). Within the syllabus the following are a minimum: list contact information for you and your TA (if you have one); location of the classroom; location of your office; office hours; and how to best connect with you. It is also helpful to include your email, phone number and Skype address.

6. **THE CONTENT: What is the content of the course and what sequence would feel most natural to the learners?** An important warning for the instructor is to watch that there is not too much WHAT (content) for the WHEN (time available). Identify the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will take priority in the course, and name what content students should be familiar with. List course readings with topics and themes, and name the essential questions to be woven throughout. It is often also helpful to differentiate between what will be taught during the face-to-face time, and what will be addressed via personal reading and other assignments.

7. **THE ACHIEVEMENT-BASED OBJECTIVES: What should the learners do or decide during the course to demonstrate they know the content?** Here you identify your achievement-based objectives, and can be written in this form: "*At the end of our course, the students will have…"* This forces objectives that are verifiable. It is imperative that for every large content piece being taught there is at least one achievement-based objective for learners to do. The content is thus intricately tied to the experience of learning (i.e. what they do in the classroom or on line or between classes, to learn the content and demonstrate to you *and themselves* they have learned it).

Also,

8. **Teaching methodology.** Explain that you will be using the principles and practices of Dialogue Education throughout your course. Depending on what this means for you, you may include sentences such as:
   - "We will work in 5 table groups to allow for group work, discussion and small group teaching."
   - "You will be invited to engage with the readings during class, where there will be opportunity to test and challenge theories, questions and personalize concepts, and practice and assess tools. To maximize our class time, all reading will be completed outside of class."

9. **Assignments**. Clarity about what is expected of students is in the total assessment. Clearly list all the assignments, when they are due, and what % they are worth. Model DE principles and practices by explaining how you will invite students to demonstrate their best work; personalize the program and engage in meaningful and relevant learning. They need to see how they, as unique individuals, are being considered. For example:
   - "Choose between a traditional (i.e. researched paper) or non-traditional (i.e. a play, art show, or another creative idea) paper. Describe and justify your choice."
   - "Choose 3 books from the resource list for your journal assignment. List your choices and what questions you bring to these readings."

10. **Assessment**. Clarify how you will assess student work, why and with what tools or rubrics. To maximize relevance, respect, and inclusion many professors are moving to a multi-faceted approach to assessment: self-assessment, peer assessment, and professor assessment. Although this cannot be used for all assignments, for some it is most appropriate. The key is: what is most meaningful for the connection between the content and the learner/student.

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