Bringing Your Syllabus to Life with Inclusivity and Creativity

SPEAKERS
Amy Mulnix, Tierney King, Jeremy Caplan, Tona Hangen

Tierney King 00:00
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Conference. This year, join us in-person in Atlanta to pursue your passion for teaching. The syllabus. It's where everything lives, from due dates to policies to your office hours to who you are as a teacher, it's all-encompassing. And with that, the syllabus can get pretty lengthy. It may even sometimes get overwhelming for both you and your students, and maybe even boring for students to read. But it doesn't have to be that way. In today's episode, we're going to talk about how you can add that creative flair to your syllabus, and then specific tools you can use to do this. We'll talk about how you can get your students to read your syllabus. And finally, what to look for when you're creating an inclusive and antiracist syllabus. To start, Jeremy Caplan talks about how you can view your syllabus as something so much more in his 20-Minute Mentor, How Can I Create an Engaging, Student-focused Syllabus?

Jeremy Caplan 01:11
Like the overture to a great opera, an amuse-bouche before a wonderful meal, or the entryway to a gorgeous building, a syllabus serves a welcoming role for a learning experience you're creating. It lays the foundation for a successful course. Let's refresh your syllabus with a creative approach. To engage students and bring your syllabus to life, let's rethink and update its form. So let's talk about what great syllabi really look and feel like one of the best syllabi have in common. For first of all, they're engaging. When Mozart wrote the delicious overture to Don Giovanni, he waved a magical wand over listeners in 1787 Prague. His short overture pointed to so many colorful melodies, moods and mysteries that they could expect to unfold in the opera ahead. We certainly may not have the genius of Mozart, I certainly don't, but we can learn from his approach. Grab students' attention by giving them a delightful, curiosity-inducing preview of what's to come. Instead of giving them legalese and formulaic fine print in your syllabus, give them a map of the exciting learning journey that you've designed to give them a delicious amuse-bouche. In addition to being engaging, the best syllabi are scannable. Great magazines have multiple entry points. I used to work for Time Magazine and one spring we decided to rethink the table of contents as a place that could be more than just a list of page numbers. It could be a pleasing diving board from which you, the reader, could pick a subject of particular interest to you. In designing a syllabus, we want to think about how people are going to scan through that. We want to

make it easy for people to read by including visuals. For example, a scannable syllabus lets students efficiently see what's ahead and roam around the course map to focus on the questions or elements of the course that they're most curious about, and they are most eager to find out more about. Many great syllabi also have a compelling narrative. A syllabus can feature a narrative that pulls students into the mystery of your subject matter and and addresses some of the courses guiding questions. And it's can certainly be visually appealing. It can be attractive, like a menu that shows enticing images of the food that you'll be eating. when you visit a restaurant. A syllabus can have visual variety, like a poem with ups and downs, lilts and rhythmic cadences. Let's talk about some tools you can use to create that kind of a syllabus that has that visual pop that I'm referring to. First is notion. And you can find it at notion.so. Notion is a simple, easy-to-use, free document creation tool that allows you to embed images, videos and audio files right into your syllabus along with any other interactive kind of content that might be specific to your subject matter. You can even include tables that allow students to filter and sort just what they want to focus on when they're looking at what's ahead on your course. The second tool I want to recommend is called Coda which you can find at coda.io. It's another free tool and similar to notion that lets you embed visual content ranging from YouTube videos, to images, diagrams, charts and illustrations. I'm not suggesting you create a massive publishing project, I'm just suggesting you weave in a few engaging visuals to make the syllabus feel interesting feel visually stimulating and encourage students to actually dive in and explore it. A third tool I'll recommend for you is called craft and the link to access that is craft.do. And as with the other tools, it is free and easy to get started with. It's great for creating a visually engaging syllabus. There's a free version, as I mentioned, and it has all the features that you need. And craft specializes in creating special preview cards for each section of your syllabus. So you can create your whole syllabus on one page, with each section neatly tucked into preview cards that can be tapped and opened up so that students can see everything in the course. But don't have to get overwhelmed by seeing it all at once or seeing it in a long 10-page version that can just tap and open up a section.

Tierney King 05:39
As you dive into different tools you can use to give your syllabus of visual pop, you also want to consider how you can write a syllabus that your students will actually read. In this next part, Tona Hangen will offer insight and how you can write a course syllabus that's worth reading in her 20-Minute Mentor clip.

Tona Hangen 05:55
In this presentation, I'm going to take us through three steps of creating a beautiful syllabus. The first is course design. The second is syllabus design. And the third is applying some visual design elements to your syllabus. Let me begin with course design. This will be brief and probably a review for many of you. But I want to begin with the notion that a course should be designed backwards. Thinking backwards means beginning with two very important questions. What should the student know or be able to do by the end of the course? And what learning outcomes does this course need to meet? Those are very important questions, and you need to resolve those right up front. But it's also, of course, design is thinking beyond just those outcomes as well. So in a course design, given the answers to those outcomes questions, you think about what they'll do their learning activities and their assessments, and what you'll teach, and what they'll do is different from what you'll teach. So you think about what you'll teach, and then connect that to what they will learn or what they need to know. Step

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two syllabus design. Now that you've got the course design, how are you going to put that into a document that your students need? In order to make sense of your course. I've provided in the handout, a course a checklist of things that could be included in a syllabus, but like an overpack suitcase, you don't want it to overflow. So you want to pack efficiently what really belongs in a syllabus and what doesn't. I think it's important to get the two twin anxieties right into the room with us here. One is bloat. The tendency toward syllabi becoming longer and longer. And the second is the worry that a longer syllabus will turn students off that they don't read it. And so how do you balance out these when you're thinking about how to design a syllabus. I like to think of a syllabus as having a story, as not just being just a static list but as having a dynamic flow. And so a metaphor might help or a model. It's a contract, but not literally a contract. It's a communication device. Maybe it's more like a guidebook, it could take the form of a cognitive map. I've thought about some of mine as toolkits. Like here's the toolkit that we're building over the course of the semester. And in some of mine I've talked about things that we're covering, and also cognitive processes like historical thinking that we're uncovering as we go through the course. So I found a model or a metaphor to be a helpful way to think about how to organize a syllabus, so that it makes sense, as a student encounters it. One of the things that I've learned about syllabi is that they can be built with invitations or promises in them. There can be things left undone that the student can fill in for themselves. In one of my early syllabi, this is an example that I've used of inviting students to think about their engagement in the course in a number of different ways. They might be beginners, they might be taking my course as a Gen Ed course, they might not really care about the content to begin with. Or they might be a major and have a lot of involved prior knowledge. And so they might want more from it. So I've, in one of my syllabi, I've handed it over to the students and given them responsibility to think about how they engage with the course. Are they wading? Are they snorkeling? Or are they scuba diving? These are ABC ideas. It's not that the scuba divers are the A students and the waders are lower down in the grading. It's that any student can succeed at the level that they want to engage with the course.I just want them to be conscious and intentional about how they're approaching their learning. Visual design is one of my favorite things to think about with a syllabus. I have many sources that I go to for inspiration for visual design in the syllabus. Think about a magazine layout about how font is used and how images are incorporated, and what makes something engaging to look at. Think about cookbooks. One of the great appeals of a cookbook is that it provides you a visual image or a mental image of what the finished product will look like. And you want your syllabus to do the same thing for what the students learning is going to look like by the end of the semester. And then a cookbook provides a complete list of all the things that you need in order to succeed and the instructions of how to put it all together. So cookbooks not a bad way to look both for for metaphorical design and for visual design as well. A lot of cookbooks are just really fun to read. So as a recap, a syllabus worth reading employs good course design. It employs good syllabus design, and then it concisely communicates the courses purpose and design and its learning pathway so that it orients the students do your learning approaches in a way that invites their engagement. And most importantly in its visual design, it reflects the instructor style, it tells the story and it shows creativity and intentionality and care and visual design. I think you'll find that students respond to that well, and that it helps set the first positive impression and starts the instructor student relationship on a strong footing. Every course needs a syllabus. We all write them. I want to encourage you to make your syllabus even more beautiful.

Tierney King 11:26

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Creating a beautiful syllabus doesn't stop here. For educators looking for ways to close the gap between privileged and minoritized students, Amy Mulnix demonstrates how to improve the success of minority students through implementing an antiracist syllabus in this 20-Minute Mentor clip.

Amy Mulnix 11:43
An important part of my job is to actually work with our minoritized faculty to reduce the barriers to their success and achieving tenure. Part of the reason I love my work is that I get to work with faculty on inclusion, diversity, equity, and justice. My own experience and that of working with my faculty has really indicated to me that at the start at the outset of trying to become a better educator for our minoritized students or becoming a better antiracist educator, we often fall into a trap of thinking we can change a couple of our pedagogies to be more inclusive. That we can incorporate an evidence-based practice that shown to close opportunity gaps for our students who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or even our international students. And the reality is we actually need to reflect on our entire mindset. We need to change our pedagogical mindset so that what we're offering our minority students, our daily counter narratives, to the structural barriers they're encountering. We need to consider the stereotype threat, the macro and micro aggressions that they're encountering, the imposter syndrome that they might be feeling. So we need to be providing an ongoing counter narrative. And that's not just about changing a pedagogy here and there. So what do I mean by syllabus? Let's talk about that a second, before we head into the content. Lots of people think about a syllabus as the list of the dates, the assignments, the topics that are going to get covered. And certainly I want to include that. But I also want to include, as I talk about a syllabus, that collection of learning goals of the content that's going to get covered, the assignment descriptions, the policies. And as we've moved online, we've expanded the quote unquote syllabus in a lot of other ways. Many of us now provide tips for how to be successful in a class or links to mental health resources, or links to technology support. So I'm thinking about a syllabus in this entirety of what it is we're telling our students about our classroom environment. Right. So this syllabus is actually this collection of what a faculty thinks a student should know about the course about the semester about their learning environment. And boy, is that an opportunity for biases and for discrimination, and for structural barriers that exists in higher education to creep into our formalized policies and processes for our classroom. Alright, let's look at some syllabus examples and think about how we can be doing things differently, how we can be creating an anti racist classroom. This first example is an academic integrity statement. I know from when working with faculty, that they typically include an academic integrity statement that is a link to the student handbook. And they make a statement that makes it clear to the students that the faculty member expects the student to follow the policy that's in the handbook. I'm going to give you an example of a really different approach. So I'm going to go ahead and read this to you. Academic integrity is an essential component of any learning community. I want you to be successful in this course and there are many opportunities for assistance. Achieving grades that do not represent your own work is not true success. Stress, lack of sleep, demands beyond being a student, and completing assignments at the last minute can contribute to poor decision making. If you find yourself tempted to cross the line, I encourage you to speak with me so we can strategize, discuss ways you can enhance your own learning experiences, and truly make you a successful student. This is a really different approach to academic integrity. The reasons I think it's antiracist are these. First of all, this statement is creating a sense of belonging, it's making clear to the student that they are valued, and that they're part of a community, a learning community. It's also communicating a sense of partnership. This isn't just about the student off on their own. It's about being

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a partner, the faculty member being a partner with the student. A third reason is that this statement communicates a growth mindset. It says yes, we make mistakes. Those mistakes are not personal failings, they're typically bad choices. Here's the things that lead up to those bad choices. And I believe you have control over making decisions that are different than those bad choices. And I want to help you do that. Another way that this is anti racist is that this statement is actually providing a great deal of transparency. I'm defining what I mean by academic integrity. I'm defining the circumstances when students are tempted not to follow academic integrity policies, and I'm making clear that I want to be of assistance to them. This is also antiracist because it values the particular students identities and a diverse set of identities. It's recognizing that students often have lots of other things happening in their lives. And that as part of the classroom experience, I want to value that I want to recognize that as their faculty member,

Tierney King 17:55
Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.