

Teaching Tips/Notes



The Syllabus Contract

We all have a syllabus; each and every class, each and every semester. It is often times referred to as our contract with the students. It informs the students in the class what is expected of them. However, the syllabus rarely presents what is expected of the professor on behalf of the students, with the possible exception of the requisite weekly office hour. I have used an exercise on the first day of class that remedies that situation and gets the semester off on a positive note.

I teach landscape architecture at Texas Tech University. In our design studios, we assign design projects by presenting a problem statement and minimum requirements. Some scholars have referred to our project assignments as the “wicked problem” in that there is no one correct answer and every student will probably (and should) have a different solution. Our goal, along with accuracy and quality graphics, is to have students make critical decisions about design options and be able to defend those decisions. It is often frustrating for students who are used to high school performance tests, multiple choice and true/false questions, or the algebra problem with one correct answer. An important part of the process is one-on-one student/teacher interaction in the design studio. So what does this have to do with the syllabus?

On a few occasions (when I remembered) on the first day of class, I have presented the syllabus as usual and explained that it describes what I expect from you, the student. I then ask, “What do you expect of me?” I’ll even write “Student Expectations” on the white board. After their initial shock subsides, someone will timidly offer a suggestion; then another, and another and eventually other students are nodding their head in agreement. Invariably, they have asked for clear instructions, fairness, time with me at their desk, timely feedback and, in some form or another, respect. In my experience, the exercise accomplishes several things. First, it gives me the opportunity explain again my expectations that they solve their design problems in a logical, creative and well thought out manner. That I’m not going to give them an answer, or say that their design solution is wrong if they can logically defend their solution. I even explain the term “wicked problem” and the notion that good design is “when it no longer makes sense to ask why.” (Which is not my quote but I am not able to attribute it to a particular individual.)

Secondly, the exercise lets me know what they are truly concerned about or are fretting over. If they believe I care and will pay attention to their concerns they begin the semester with a little more self-confidence. It is important to note here that genuineness is essential or the entire exercise is counterproductive. Finally, it gets them to buy into their side of the responsibilities expressed in the syllabus, if they know I intend to buy into my responsibilities as a professor. Try it, you might like it!

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