The Syllabus As Contract and Strategy – All You Really Need to Know

Dr. Hans Gutbrod[1]
hans.gutbrod@gmx.net

Second Draft
Please let me know if you want to quote or use this.

Syllabi are at the core of the teaching enterprise. As formal documents describing the content of courses, they structure interaction and the learning experience. No functioning institution would work without them. They are to Higher Education what plans are to architects. However, there is little systematic thinking about them. Ask a young lecturer what a syllabus is -- and the answer is likely to be incomplete. This can have consequences: often institutional discussions about syllabi are a mechanical transfer of formats, of headings that need to be filled out. In this setting, teaching remains fragmented, incomplete and sometimes even incoherent, much as if builders went to task without any coordination.

What, then, does this essay seek to contribute?

In the following pages, I want to suggest that good syllabi are easy to set up if we understand that there are two complementary functions: they are both a strategy and a contract. Everything else we need to know about the syllabus follows from these functions. So there are three purposes to this essay:
- you will know how to set up a syllabus
- you will understand how to evaluate other syllabi, and how to give advice on improving them
- the essay offers both practical steps for an individual and a framework for discussion within institutions

It should be stressed that this is put forward as a suggestion, open to correction and improvements. It reflects my current thinking on these issues and I'm writing not to put forward a dogma, but to explain some of the approaches that I have found useful when thinking about these questions.

The essay begins by outlining the role of strategy and contract in detail. It then explains how this relates to setting up syllabi, considering entry-level, learning objectives, assessment, course policies, sequence and resources. Essentially, planning a syllabus moves through six stages: first we identify what the current students can do. Then we decide what we want to teach them. We set up corresponding assessment systems, arrange a suitable teaching sequence to reach these objectives and organize course policies and resources to support that teaching sequence. It is an iterative planning process, which we may have to go through several times, adjusting, for example, objectives to current abilities or resources.[2]

---

[2] This is not an essay about planning, but some understanding of planning may be useful. I've outlined some communications planning that can be applied in my *Handbook for Professional Communication*. The single best book on planning I have found is Richard Stutely, *The Definitive Business Plan: The Fast-Track to Intelligent Business Planning for Executives and Entrepreneurs*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2002); although written for business, the principles can be transferred.

The essay is primarily intended for readers who draft syllabi for the first time, or who want to review their existing syllabus. It may also be suitable for people who have done some thinking about syllabi, who want to contribute to reform in their department, and who are looking for a systematic approach. I have tried to enrich the essay with practical hints and suggestions, ideas that I have found useful. Furthermore, the essay might be suitable for some non-lecturers as well -- administrators, or curious students who want to take very conscious decisions about their learning experience.

This first section of the essay is abstract and compressed. It is the most important part since everything follows from it. Without grasping the way in which the syllabus acts as contract and strategy, any approach will be incomplete. The second part discusses the setup of the syllabus in detail. Much of this will be obvious, since it follows naturally from the first section. I'm spelling it out in detail to make the essay exhaustive, especially for readers with little experience in constructing a syllabus.

The last section points out that any new syllabus is, in a way, an experiment. It is a test for the strategy and a contract. Like a hypothesis, the syllabus is modified in response to new insights. When you introduce a course, there are many things you do not yet know and which you need to try out -- and should try out, because without experiment there is no innovation. In a way that is true for most human practices, but it needs to be emphasized in this context, to ensure that expectations are realistic. The section concludes with answering some potential objections, as well as review questions and provisional exercises which ideally will encourage you to develop your own checklist.

I strongly suggest that you read this essay while keeping some syllabi to hand, ideally between two and four. These may be your own, or those of other lecturers. Ideally choose at least one very good one as a benchmark. The syllabi will provide the practical illustrations which will make the discussion come alive, furnishing examples that you immediately can work with. Without these examples, as the first readers of this essay found, parts of the second section appear suspended outside immediate application. Look, therefore, at the following pages as a manual: it is most worth reading it when you actually have an instrument to practice and try out with. If you don't have any syllabi immediately available, check www.ceu.hu/crc/ and pick three at random. You are free to ignore this advice, but I guarantee you a better experience if you follow this suggestion.

Lastly, on a point of definition: syllabi are the documents outlining a course, whereas curricula are the more comprehensive program of courses, although curriculum is sometimes used as a word to describe the setup of a single course as well. We will stick with the narrow definition of syllabus here.

Syllabus as Contract and Strategy

Strategy
The syllabus is a strategy. It is the plan for how to make students master specific abilities or concepts that they previously did not have. Like any strategy, it is a comprehensive plan for getting from here to there, a systematic arrangement of means towards an end. It builds on existing strengths, minimizes weaknesses, exploits opportunities and reduces risks wherever possible.

The syllabus shares all other characteristics of a strategy. It is a conscious organization of sequence, responding to specific contextualized requirements. As in the military setting, the most obvious strategy may not necessarily be the best. Sometimes indirect approaches work better. The best approach depends, in part, on the effective mobilization of the locally available resources. The limits of these resources must be fully understood. Greater resources give more possibilities but limited resources often produce highly innovative and imaginative strategies.

Strategies, like syllabi, are instruments for coordination. Strategies allow people to achieve a common goal together. They allocate tasks and also limit the contribution each participant has to make. Similarly, the syllabus defines who does what when where how in the learning process. All of it is intricately integrated towards the larger purpose.

Strategies, therefore, are instruments of self-discipline. They are what gets us out of the woods when we only see trees. They are simplefiers, giving us directions when we threaten to be overwhelmed by detail. Syllabi and strategies allow us to prioritize, that is, to decide against distractions that temporarily seem attractive and important. A good strategy directs effort and conserves energy.

For all their technical rigor, strategies are a social institution. They make achievement and cooperation possible and their restrictions are, ironically, liberating. By defining necessary effort and activity they free us up for other activities. Strategies and syllabi organize our action and define when a task is over and how much needs to be contributed. They help people to succeed together and thereby generate social cohesion. And this brings us to how the syllabus defines the relationship between people engaged in learning.

Contract
The syllabus also serves as a contract. It defines and structures the relationship between three parties: the student, the lecturer and the institution. As all contracts, the syllabus specifies obligations. The teacher promises to enhance the students' ability. The students -- at least implicitly -- accept the workload defined in the syllabus: to prepare, review, to read and to write their assignments. The institution undertakes to offer teaching rooms and relevant facilities, including books or access to computers, or even offices for office hours.

As any contract, the syllabus should therefore allow all participants to form realistic expectations. It is a deal in which all sides know what they will get, if they do what they promise. In other words, the syllabus should guard against disappointment because in defining the relationships it makes the future predictable.[3] As all contracts it should define what tasks are to be performed when and how, and what results or even rewards are to be expected -- and what constitutes nonperformance, as well

---

[3] For a one such paper discussing the reduction of uncertainty for students see Mary Ann Danielson, "The Role of the Course Syllabi in Classroom Socialization" (paper presented at the Central States Communication Association, Indianapolis, 1995)

as the results of such non-performance.

Thinking of syllabi as a contract highlights two further aspects, both potentially neglected uses of a detailed syllabus.

First, contracts very generally are a platform for refining relationships. They allow us to begin cautious cooperation even where we don't know, like or even fully trust the other parties that are engaged. Working with contracts expands our ability to work with others. Their form itself -- the written specification of mutual obligations -- makes it possible to transfer nuanced relationships between strangers. In teaching we can transfer this nuanced relationship from one class to the next, without knowing the individuals. Effectively contracts reduce the pressure on the parties to create and maintain the typically fragile personal relationship of trust. Teaching still can be based on -- and flourish through -- charisma and trust, but it no longer needs to exclusively rely on these two ephemeral qualities anymore.

Contracts therefore also are a platform for improving relationships. If previously relationships have not been successful, contracts can be refined and respond to the shortcomings. They therefore reflect the learning process that would be much more difficult to articulate if it had not been set down in writing.

Second, contracts involving three parties (as is the case with syllabi) ensure that no party is disadvantaged: it makes it more difficult for two parties to collude to disadvantage the third. This is, to be sure, a standard problem wherever different people need to be coordinated: a contractor can sell a product to a client at a sharply reduced price in return for a present, disadvantaging the parent company. Contracts ideally guard against such collusion (although control can be difficult). In an academic setting this is as important as in business. The short-term interest of students and teachers is to reduce their workload. Teachers want time for other professional activity which brings in additional rewards, such as additional paid teaching or research. Students want to enjoy time with friends or work to earn money. The institution here is a custodian of the collective long-term interests: for students to learn much, for teachers to work in a reputable institution. It is a real problem: in one young institution which I know well, teachers and students together removed the ambition and challenge from the intense syllabus when there was a power vacuum at the institutional level after the old Dean left and the new one had not arrived yet. It did lasting damage to the institution. Syllabi -- as good contracts -- should be set so as to prevent this collusion from occurring on a day-to-day level, students being lax about attendance and preparation, teachers giving little homework (to minimize work outside the teaching hours).

Components of Contract and Strategy

These two purposes -- strategy and contract -- govern the nature of the syllabus. If you start from them, the detail of the next few pages which explains elements of the syllabus follows quite naturally. This is, of course, a description of abstract headings. Simultaneously it also implies the procedure, as mentioned above. We analyze what we have, design our intended outcomes which we integrate with our assessment, develop a teaching sequence and then organize course policies to support them, while reconciling intended outcomes and sequences with the constraints, such as limited resources. It is a classical planning procedure: dynamic, occasionally chaotic, driven by a search for an integrated design, at first difficult but eventually resulting in a sense of relief and achievement. Here it goes:

Entry-level/Requirements
Under this heading, you define what competence students need to bring to attend the course. Strategically, it defines the "here" from which we will get to the "there". By knowing where we are, we can plan how to reach our objective. Drafting this section, you need to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the students. What are the students good at already? And what are they not yet capable of? Your requirements should be integrated and coordinated with other courses in the overall program. Exploit what others have taught and assist others in drawing on your teaching. Students, too, will be grateful if the program is integrated, courses building on each other. This allows them to enhance and deepen their skills.

From a contractual point of view, the entry-level requirements are useful when choosing courses. They tell you that if you bring the required ability and work as suggested, you are likely to reach the intended objectives. Increasing entry-level requirements allows you to teach advanced courses for students bringing higher ability. This increases motivation, as advanced students want to be challenged. By specifying entry-level requirements, you also create the possibility of offering more advanced, challenging courses to students bringing increased ability.

Make sure students listen to the requirements, write them into the syllabus and police them. I am speaking from experience: in my first year of university I attended a course in Economics. I did not listen when the lecturer said that students should bring advanced knowledge of economics or mathematics from school (I had neither) and I did not do well in this course -- and also did not enjoy it.

Incidentally, if you are offering a non-obligatory course it can be a good idea to describe your course as rigorous and challenging. This keeps out students who are not motivated. You can then concentrate on working with committed students, which obviously is particularly enjoyable.

Learning Objectives
Syllabi must have learning objectives. These can also be referred to as goals, learning targets, intended outcomes or course purposes. The learning objectives describe how students will be transformed by the course. What skills and abilities will they acquire which they previously did not have? If the entry-level requirements described the "here" before the course, the learning objectives described the "there" that we strive towards.

The strategic and contractual component require that these learning objectives must be well-articulated, limited and properly integrated both into the syllabus itself, and into the broader studying program. All the participants need to know what they work for.

The objectives also define the strategic priorities. This is one reason why there should not be too many objectives -- in principle, priorities must always be limited, otherwise they no longer are priorities (literally *what comes first*). As in a strategy, the priorities should focus effort and help to avoid irrelevant activity. They offer criteria by which we can make decisions on what needs to be done in day-to-day situations -- and what questions to ignore.

This implies that the objectives should be phrased in terms of demonstrable skills. As one author points out, we ideally should avoid saying students will "know" or "understand" because these are passive characteristics.[4] It is preferable to state objectives (or outcomes) in terms of skills students can *show*, or at least to specify what constitutes the performance that indicates that the skill has been learned. Overall, the emphasis should be on skills anyway, rather than on passive knowledge. Any knowledge needs to be applied, used, brought into other contexts before it actually changes the student. Otherwise the relationship between the student and new knowledge is the same as that between a bookshelf and a book: nothing changes the bookshelf by putting the book into it, even if it is an extremely good book.

In most programs, the aim must be to develop students' judgment -- their ability to come to plausible decisions about the subject matter without guidance.[5] Such judgment includes analysis, synthesis, and a solid handling of data or evidence (or "knowledge"). It also requires the ability to balance factors against each other, a good understanding of the criteria by which we judge, as well as some imagination.

Another reason for the emphasis on skills is that these are transferable. Having learnt, for example, to do detailed historical research, we can apply these skills to other professional settings as well, such as research into a public policy issue. The other advantage of skills is that they are quite durable. We may forget knowledge, but we typically keep a residual core of skills which we can activate quickly. If our history teacher taught us how to write well, we will be able to use this skill in many fields and therefore retain it for decades, long after we have forgotten the details of Byzantine court intrigues.

In this context, knowledge can remain relevant. We can train memorization and handling of large sets of data by requiring students to learn many facts. In some subjects, learning a broad amount of data promotes the recognition of patterns and structures that underlie the overall system. Moreover, this knowledge often forms the basis of qualified judgment which is why it may be integrated into the course. The raw acquisition of data therefore is not futile, but it is only one potential learning objective and not really a purpose in itself. It is one instrument with which we can pursue the intellectual development of students.

As any strategic objective, learning objectives should be limited. A strategy with unlimited objectives chases the end of the rainbow, never arriving where it intends to go. The limits are about articulating

---

[4] Philip Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Learning, Teaching & Assessment*, 2nd ed. (London, Sterling, VA: Kogan Page; Stylus Pub., 2001), p. 24

[5] See Bloom's famous taxonomy: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation; for a quick overview see W. Huitt, *Bloom Et Al.'S Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain.* (2004 [cited July 2005); available from http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/cogsys/bloom.html; see also Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Count Again* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

realistic objectives that actually can be reached and that correspond to actual needs. An economics course, for example, is not going to turn a law student into a competent economist. But it may familiarize her with key concepts of economics as they are relevant to the practice and development of law. Nor will a semester be enough to turn an economics student into a lawyer. But an introductory course may help her understand the importance of legal institutions in economic development, including an analysis of property rights, contract law, bankruptcy and insolvency provisions, and so on.

From a contractual point of view, the precision of learning objectives is important. Precision harmonizes expectations: students and lecturers (as well as the institution) know in detail what their courses do. If the course is voluntary, students can decide whether the course is what they really want, because they know what they gain by participating. If the course is obligatory, the institution relies on it as an essential part of the overall program. Lecturers teaching sub-sequent courses can build on what has been achieved and know about the entry-level of their students.

A different aspect of the contract is that the learning objectives essentially are like a guarantee. If students bring the entry-level requirements and do the required work, they should be able to achieve the learning objectives. Some students will do better than others, and the learning objectives should reflect a reasonable average, a point we will discuss in more detail under assessment. It follows that lecturers should only promise what they themselves can deliver (which is another reason not to have too many objectives).

I occasionally found it useful to form a visual image of the intended results. When I was teaching an intensive course in Higher Education issues, I imagined the graduates of this short course as being able to work as qualified assistants for a Dean trying to reform his department. I wanted to give them the conceptual framework and some of the skills that would allow them to do this task well. They would be able to analyze the broader Higher Education system, identify appropriate assessment strategies, evaluate syllabi for their coherence and technical plausibility, and distinguish various complementary and contradictory purposes of Higher Education. These were some of the abilities that I wanted to impart on them. The implicit limitation was that they themselves would still require qualified guidance as well as practical experience before being able to work independently.

There are some further suggestions which I have found useful.[6] When writing the learning objectives, make them personal so that the students feel that they are being addressed: "you will learn how to..." sounds better than "students will acquire the analytical skills of..." because it speaks directly to them. Ideally, think of an example of the skill that you want the students to perform. Lastly, some of the learning objectives will be given by the larger course program. Do think, however, how you can adapt and improve them (which often is merely a matter of re-phrasing the language). These measures make for a better strategy and a better contract and thereby a better syllabus.

Assessment

In assessing the students, we again fulfill the strategic and contractual obligation. Strategically, we evaluate whether we have reached our objective. Assessment tells us, among other things, whether and how we need to adapt our teaching strategies. Contractually it rewards the students who perform well and thereby motivates them. It also marks out students who have not done so well. This can and should guide students to improvement, telling them that (and how) their current performance is not

---

[6] Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Learning, Teaching & Assessment* , pp. 21-26

yet adequate. Simultaneously it preserves the standing of the institution because it upholds and reinforces academic standards, while also giving information to potential employers.

Assessment should test exactly for the learning objectives. This is vital for strategic and contractual reasons. Students will do what they get rewarded for which is why there should not be a discrepancy between learning objectives and the actual assessment. To put it figuratively, you cannot tell people to prepare for an expedition to the desert and then drop them at the North Pole. Concretely, this integration requires planning and often some experimentation. To give some examples:

- if you want to develop note-taking skills in first-year students, set assessment that encourages good note-taking. This can be open-note exams, in which students can bring their own, hand-written notes into the exam.[7]
- if you want students to work consistently and are worried that they will engage in binge-like learning with relatively low retention just before the exam, increase the element of continuous assessment.
- if students should be able to solve a particular type of problem, set this type of problem as your examination -- in a class teaching research methods, ask them to draft a research project.
- if you have confidence in your students and want to encourage self-organization and independent work, create a high-pressure exam (limited time and limited predictability) for which they have to prepare themselves consistently over several months (typically British and German universities favor this approach, whereas American universities rely more on continuous assessment).

and so on.

In fact, you can ask students to suggest both the form of the exam and the content, telling them that this has to derived from the learning objectives. You can grade the student's proposals as one part of the assessment. It is a good way for them to think about the skills and the learning objectives and how they can demonstrate what they have learnt. There will be some plainly self-serving suggestions, but on balance the advantages of this method far outweigh any problems. Students feel that their improvement and progress towards the learning objectives is what assessment is about.

You may want to state what you consider to be excellence. What marks out a great performance? Again, this is useful for both contractual and strategic reasons. If you give students a benchmark, they know what to strive for. There are different ways of doing this. You can choose an abstract description ("to get the best grade, students have to demonstrate their independent judgment, which is informed by a comprehensive grasp of the subject matter..."). Additionally, you can also provide some three to five examples of excellence. Ideally these should differ in their characteristics, so that students don't merely copy what they see. The first sample could be a very detailed, reflective and elaborate rendition. The second could be an imaginative, original piece, putting forward an unorthodox view, with the third succeeding because of a relentless focus on a well-chosen, representative narrow aspect of a broader problem. These samples do not need to be entirely perfect,

---

[7] Technically this can be done by stamping and signing notes at the end of a lecture and only admitting stamped and signed documents into the exam. Alternatively, students can submit their notes after the lecture. Or they can be requested to submit the notes that they will bring into the exam (which may include notes taken from books) before the exam in a transparent cover, to be handed out in the exam itself. Another alternative version is to require students to present a card or a small paper filled with notes about essential reading. Without such a card students are not allowed to attend class. However, students are allowed to take these guards into their final exam. This greatly improved attendance and discussion. See David Jacques, *Learning in Groups: A Handbook for Improving Group Work* (London: Kogan Page, 2001), p. 207-8

in fact it can help if they also have their minor flaws, but they can illustrate directly what you mean by excellent performance -- whereas explaining this can take a very long time. Again, it takes time to collect this material which is the reason why courses tend to improve in their second and third cycle, and why the first time a course is taught it always is somewhat provisional.

The last reason why the assessment should test for the learning objectives is because this is a way of evaluating the strategy itself. Does the course really develop the students' abilities as planned? Is it too easy? Or too difficult? Which of the objectives are reached and which are students continuing to struggle with? Assessing the students is a way of testing the syllabus's hypothesis, while at the same time allowing the institution to check whether students are performing as intended. It thereby contributes to the upholding of the contractual relationship and mutual obligations and in itself reinforces the importance of syllabi.

Sequence

The sequence describes the steps undertaken in the strategy. I prefer the word sequence because it emphasizes that the strategy requires a conscious arrangement, broken down into a series of steps. You can, however, also call this "course outline", "topics", "schedule of classes/lectures" or simply "content". The point is that the sequence should be governed by the pursuit of the objectives. Every major interaction should contribute to this goal. Occasional digressions are possible, but only if they serve to highlight additional perspectives, explore further connections or deepen understanding by analogy. Put differently: the sequence of the course is determined by the learning process, not by a structure that is dictated by the object of teaching.

When imparting skills, lecturers ought to be aware of the classical M-DEED methodology. It starts by **motivating** students, then **demonstrating** the skills that are required before **explaining** the criteria that govern its practice. Students subsequently **emulate** the skill, trying out various separate components of the skill, receiving feedback to guide them towards proper performance. Once they can exercise the skill, they move towards **drilling** it, deepening their command and acquiring fluency. I have written about this in other material available both in English and German. An awareness of these components should govern the methodical approach to teaching skills, although it obviously is not intended as a fixed, immutable schedule. Again, some experimentation is required to get it right. The main point is that the teaching of any skill requires a model, the provision of criteria of performance, and an opportunity to practice them under supervision giving constructive feedback, and eventually practice, practice, practice, to fully integrate the skill.[8]

Although different approaches to structure the subject matter can be taken, all approaches should reflect the movement towards the learning objective. In other words, the sequence of the course is determined by the learning process, not by a structure that is inherent in the object of teaching. If we were to teach, say, the Economics of Development there may be various ways of approaching the sequence:

- Chronology: in which we chart the development of thinking about economics of development.
- Main Perspectives: the major theories and how they complement and contradict each other.

---

[8] Hans Gutbrod, "Wie Vermittelt Man Urteilskraft? Die Essaymethode an Georgischen Universitäten," in *Geistes- Und Sozialwissenschaftliche Hochschullehre in Osteuropa: Eindrücke, Erfahrungen Und Analysen an Universitäten Des Ehemaligen Sowjetblocks*, ed. Andreas Umland (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005); a more extended manuscript is being prepared in English. Check with author if interested.

- Conceptual Framework first: explaining the concepts and techniques of approaching development questions.
- Problem-Centred: look at specific problems (and demonstrate to students how concepts can help to address them).
- Contradictions: teach the main discussions and disagreements in Development Economics.

This list is not exhaustive and some of the approaches can be combined. All sequences can be presented in ascending or descending order of importance. Moreover, one could start by a central riddle which students cannot solve, and begin to equip students with the concepts and analytical techniques that help them to approach this riddle. Integrated in the course may be a development of various skills, which are taught with the M-DEED approach (for example writing a policy analysis). Even courses in history need not follow a strict chronological order. They can be structured, instead, by a focus on major turning points, continuities and discontinuities, disagreements of different schools of thought, or by increasingly deepening from an initial overview.[9]

Sequencing the sessions according to strategy actually is liberating. It makes teaching more rewarding because students make better progress. Teaching is more flexible because various approaches can be used, and therefore more exciting. Students themselves also respond well, especially if they feel the progress they are making. Designing such a sequence may not require radical innovation, but just reflection on the connection between the learning objectives and actual steps towards them. Be prepared, therefore, to come up with a conscious, well-worked out design.

In contractual terms, the sequence allows students and institution to check both the plausibility of what is being offered and the actual progress during the course. By outlining the sequence, lecturers provide the detail that allows others to examine how much thought they put into their arrangement and whether the learning objectives are matched by specific steps towards them.

Retain some flexibility -- as any good strategy would.[10] This is especially true if you are teaching a course for the first time. If you encourage student participation and contribution and generate enthusiasm among students, some overruns are likely. You could schedule up to 10% of your teaching time as review classes, in which you connect and discuss previous issues, offering the larger picture or focusing on some interesting detail. This then can be a class which you can use to catch up, as well as cover these extra items. This helps you to keep to the schedule, if overruns are likely.

Assignments
Assignments can be stated separately or integrated into the sequence-section. The purpose of assignments is to make students work actively towards the intended learning objectives, contributing their own work time. Assignments thus multiply the impact of the relatively rare (and expensive) contact hours. Well-crafted assignments coordinate students' work and integrate it into the progress towards new skills and abilities. Ideally they are structured around preparing for a lecture/class and afterwards reviewing the material as well. This engages the students with the topic and content at three separate moments, deepening their learning. In the best case, all assignments are reviewed,

---

[9] One of the most profound short essays I have ever read outlines how the 20th century was being continuous with the previous history, simultaneously a radical rupture and ultimately also discontinuous with itself. Philip Windsor, "The Twentieth Century as Self-Conscious History," in *Experiencing the Twentieth Century*, ed. Hagihara Nobutoshi, et al. (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1985)

[10] As the saying has it: "the most elegant task of leadership is to generate reserves".

although this can take a lot of time. Yet there are ways of checking students' preparation with limited effort:

- occasional multiple-choice exams, possibly unannounced
- prepared checklists that allow quick feedback on written work
- peer- and self-assessment (especially if prompted through checklists)
- use of teaching assistants for feedback
- feedback on a random selection, with a large-enough selection to make laziness risky
- online exercises, including games and quizzes, which automatically give feedback to students[11]

Obviously, one of the reasons for having an interactive teaching style is also that it helps to check whether students have completed the reading you assigned to them. This is partially a matter of questioning technique, or of prompting students to prepare answers to specific evaluative questions:

- which section of the text did you like best?
- which section of the text did you find most difficult?
- which three quotes best present the views that the author is putting forward?
- what objections to the author's views did you note?
- how does this author compare to other authors?

Again, you can set incentives for the fulfillment of all assignments by allowing students to bring their completed assignments (best handwritten, otherwise they can easily copy electronic sources) to the final exam, as material to work from.

In smaller teaching settings, you can also ask students to prepare material that one or several of them will have to present (knowing that a five-minute presentation is expected of them). Students should not know who will present the assignment, to make sure that all of them do the work. There is one tradition at a Cambridge College which illustrates this approach: for the Christmas concert, all boys in the choir have to practice the solo, and it is only in the concert itself that the conductor will point to one boy, who then -- immediately -- begins to sing the solo. It is a very powerful way of making all boys in the choir practice their precision. Another simple technique I once encountered was that the lecturer in the second class of the course asked everyone exactly which chapters they had read. Finding that the lecturer cared made the students committed to perform throughout the course.

The point is that assignments and actual lectures/classes complement each other. Every minute that lecturers invest in reviewing assignments increases the chance that students will invest a lot more of their time into the assignments. Therefore a good plan will use the teaching to build on assignments and vice versa. Again, the main criterion is coherence, the integration of the sequence with assignments towards the objective.

Thinking of the syllabus as a contract adds two insights. First, it does make sense to specify the work hours that students should spend on assignments. This is a provision of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), but it also makes sense for other reasons. Calculating work hours gives students a contractual commitment and also gives a currency to discussions about student performance. "You were meant to spend two hours on this task, and this is all that you managed to

---

[11] I have used inexpensive shareware by TAC-Software, which allows me to create various exercises which I can upload onto a web site, including a simple Yahoo group. Students enjoy the exercises, and say that it gives them good feedback about their learning. If students write from their own computer, they can send the results directly to me. See www.tac-soft.com [November 2005] . Some of their software is even free.

produce?", is a powerful reminder that students may not have done their homework. Without such a currency, students can claim that they considered their performance to be satisfactory and exhaustive -- "I did not know that I should have done more", is a likely reply to criticism. Moreover, calculated work hours give students a very clear sense of the expectations before they enter into the course. From a strategic point of view, calculated work hours are also a useful instrument, because they bring realism to the assignments, relating them to the students' actual possibilities. The second, fairly obvious, insight is that students deserve some reaction to their assignments. The assignments must make a difference and relate to the way they perform. Students who do well in their assignments should be rewarded, either directly through continuous assessment, or indirectly by designing the final exam around material that in part has already been covered in the assignments.

Assignments are the most experimental part of any new syllabus. Developing suitable materials, such as multiple-choice exams, takes time and integrating them requires fine-tuning. Here, feedback from the students at the end of the course is particularly useful. Which assignments did they find most worthwhile? What was difficult? What was an eye-opener? What would they like to have more of? And was the estimate of necessary work-hours realistic?

Course Policies

Course Policies described what cooperation is expected from students. Their role is primarily contractual. Strategically they merely describe what behavior is required to make the strategy work. As a contract, course policies help to secure discipline and eliminate distractions. They typically set out requirements for

- attendance -- with poor attendance leading to a decreased grade.
- policies for excusing when not being able to attend -- typically a written explanation for the reason, sometimes with supplementary material.
- being late to lectures -- I do not admit students that come more than 10 minutes late.
- plagiarism -- any form of unattributed copying, which should be punished severely early in the course; I regularly google texts that students submit to me and conversely give good grades for good sourcing of material.
- non-performance overall -- what form of warning will students get that are likely to fail?
- class-participation -- what type of participation do you expect? This can also be included in assessment. One experienced education professional asked all of the students in the last class "to identify those students who contributed the most to your learning."[12]
- class-behavior -- asking questions of clarification directly to the lecturer, instead of talking; listening to each other and displaying respect to others' opinions; non-use of mobile phones, including SMS.
- depending on departmental policies, the last date at which students can drop the course.

Some or all of these policies may already be set up by the Department or the University itself. This actually has advantages, because it gives students a predictable framework of courtesy and discipline.

> **"In order to do well in this course, you need to:**
> - attend regularly (i.e. all the time)
> - read all assigned and some suggested readings before you come to class
> - participate actively in classroom discussions
> - offer thoughtful and informed classroom presentations and written work
> - submit all work on time
> - follow assignments closely and carefully
>
> You are free to cut corners in all of the above areas, but I expect you to accept the consequences (i.e. an undesired grade and/or a poor learning experience) with grace."
>
> Albrecht Schnabel, Central European University,
> www.ceu.hu/crc/syllabi/97-98/ires/conflict.html

---

[12] Jerome T. Murphy, Leading and Managing Organizations, 2004 Syllabus, University of Pennsylvania; unpublished.

Lecturers can rely on standard policies, rather than having to develop their own. If such policies are set out by the institution, refer to them once more so that students definitely understand the message.

For contractual reasons, you may want to describe the disadvantages that students incur by not following the required course policies. However, there is a tension: for strategic reasons, it can be preferable to leave the exact disadvantage to students somewhat obscure, so that students cannot enter into a rational calculation ("I can miss three classes without making a difference to my grade"). If you choose this route, crack down on misbehavior early on. This will help to maintain discipline. For an elegant way of putting it, see the box ((but also note that Albrecht Schnabel has a further section where he specifically outlines the sort of behavior he does not accept).

As in all contracts, it is important that you maintain and police what has been agreed upon. If students see that course policies are not taken seriously, standards will slip quickly. Do take notes on who attends class, either by doing a roll call (which helps you learn the names), or by having a teaching assistant take attendance, or by circulating a paper. On this paper, you can also ask students to note down which of the assignments they have done (for example which pages they have read) and later call the students up on this, quizzing them on their interpretation of the text. It is a powerful incentive to be honest and gives you a written record. Don't hesitate at any point to police discipline. You're doing it on behalf of the other students, who want to reach the learning targets.

Resources
Resources describe what materials and instruments students can use to achieve the learning objectives. The resources are, so to speak, the fuel for the strategy. Typical resources are books (original texts, secondary literature, textbooks, exercise books), journals, specific journal articles and general press (newspapers, magazines) for subjects dealing with contemporary issues (economics, international relations, politics, sociology and related fields). They may also include photocopied readers as a collection of material, consisting of book sections and articles (fair usage is assumed, respect the author wherever possible). Additionally, they can contain web sites, or specific web pages. I myself like to work with additional web-based groups, such as Yahoogroups, because they facilitate electronic exchange of information. This can be useful to update your material, or to circulate additional information, or to provide Internet links and files online.

Typically you will distinguish between essential/required reading and recommended/additional materials. Students have to complete the essential assignments and may, if they want to focus on one particular topic, also follow the recommended reading. You should calculate the essential reading in your workload hours but you can assume extremely fast reading in which students are very focused. The real effort should be calculated, not how much time students take if they slow themselves down (remember Parkinson's' law: work tends to fill the time allotted for its completion). Given that reading is a relatively passive activity, it is sometimes advocated not to count the full reading hours as part of the workload, but divide it by a factor of two or even four. This does, however, raise some contractual problems because you want to give students fair and complete information. The hours for recommended reading do not need to be calculated because it is voluntary, an additional effort that they undertake because they want to do well.

How many resources are needed depends primarily on the learning objectives. Take less resources for less experienced students because they will typically require more structured guidance, developing their basic study skills before tackling more complex challenges. If students are advanced, you may want to deliberately overload them with information so that they learn to sift through oceans of data.

Towards the end of my undergraduate degree I gave myself no more than 30 minutes to get acquainted with the essence of a book, written down in notes, and for extracting some representative quotations. I would go for the table of contents, and then straight to the index and look up some items that provide key coordinates (many subjects have some issues that are like lighthouses or landmarks, in that everybody needs to situate themselves in reference to them; once you have identified them, you greatly facilitate your access to the discussion). It is a skill we regularly require because an Internet search for "syllabus format" already yields more than 8 million responses.

Limited resources constrain teaching, but good teaching nevertheless remains possible. As mentioned in the beginning, limits on resources often lead to innovative strategies. If resources are limited, one can concentrate on "close reading", the detailed study and discussion of available texts.[13] Nietzsche also has proposed "slow reading" in which we take the time to ask all the questions that relate to the text.[14] The challenge posed by the scarcity of printed material is not new. The original universities started without them, since mass-printing had not been invented. "Close reading" hence expands on medieval teaching as it was undertaken in the first real university, the Law School of Bologna in the 12th century.[15] The lecture was, as the Latin word implies, a literal reading of the text with grammatical corrections and comments. Lecturers would then "gloss" the text, which means interpreting it word by word (derived from the Greek word *glossa* -- tongue, language). The students, often working with rented texts, would take notes and the glosses themselves eventually became new texts to teach from, separated into *notabilia* (short summaries of content), *brocardica* (collections of general rules or maxims), *distinctiones* (classifications or taxonomies) and *quaestiones* (examining maxims by applying them to cases).

The basic principle can still be applied today: using teaching as an activity to generate more material to teach the next course. In fact, the development of Higher Education in countries with a limited publishing markets vitally depends on such a method because there simply is not the finance to translate (or comprehensively fund) the publication of expensive undergraduate reading material in the local language. There are many ways of overcoming constraints, including the development of locally relevant case studies, which focus on the students' own environment and develop theories and approaches in relation to the case.[16] The main problem with limited resources is that they provide a convenient excuse for not actually putting together a good strategy. Needless to say, this excuse is not acceptable. The same is true for computers. They certainly help work, but they are not strictly necessary. Education is about thinking, not about inputting information.

Contractually, resources are useful to mention because they indicate what the institution makes available. Students can therefore check syllabi before taking a course. Is it a course in which the core

---

[13] One of the key proponents is Mortimer Adler. For some Internet resources, see Patricia Kain, *How to Do a Close Reading* (1998 [cited July 2005]); available from
http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html; Roy Johnson, *What Is Close Reading?* (2004 [cited July 2005]); available from http://www.mantex.co.uk/samples/closeread.htm; *Steps for Close Reading or Explication De Texte: Patterns, Polarities, Problems, Paradigm, Puzzles, Perception* (2005 [cited July 2005]); available from http://theliterarylink.com/closereading.html
[14] Lancelot Fletcher, *Slow Reading Lists and the Meaning of Slow Reading* (1994 [cited July 2005); available from http://www.freelance-academy.org/slowread.htm
[15] Harold Joseph Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p.129-130; the best material on ancient Bologna I have found on the Web is Sylvie Davidson, *Rooted in Tradition, Experimenting with Innovation* (2000 [cited Fall]); available from http://www.dickinson.edu/magazine/fall00/articles/rooted.html
[16] I am planning to write a short paper on the use of case studies. Write to me to request an update. See also Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Count Again*

materials can be found in the library? Are the materials available at all? Or can the course not promise anything more except for a handful of copies? Needless to say, some practical thinking needs to go into the provision of these resources. It does not work if 20 students need to read a single book within one week. Essential reading needs to be made available in sufficient numbers, or restricted in such a way that everybody has access to it for at least a few hours. One way is to put essential readings into a course collection, which can only be borrowed for a few hours at a time.

Incidentally, I often found it useful to add all books that I considered relevant to the syllabus as "further reading". It is clear that students would not necessarily have immediate access to these books, but it allows them to follow up the books later, whenever they have reason to be interested in the subject again. I have not discarded a single syllabus that I have been taught, because all of them were very interesting introductions into a broad topic.

Further Items

If we have come so far, we have the complete architecture of the course. There are some further items we can or should add. Obviously there will be full identifying information, all that students and administrators need to know, including contact details. Additionally, we can write a prose text having an introduction, overview or course rationale. Yet this is what we write in the end, after putting the architecture together -- we only begin building an entrance once we have planned the house. The overview can describe what the course is about, why it may be useful or the problems it addresses.

Separately, the syllabus may include previous exam papers, as samples for students. Since students are ingenious at organizing previous exam papers anyway, a new exam will have to be set every course. By making some of the more challenging exam questions ("which criteria would you find most useful when formulating learning objectives?") available, students understand what is expected from them.

One item that I would like to see on syllabi is some information on the course history: how often has it been taught? What experience does it draw on? What students have taken it? And what did they find particularly useful? This would be information that future students would find very practical.

Syllabus as Hypothesis

The items above contain all that you really need to construct a complete, integrated, first-class syllabus. The guiding principles -- strategy and contract -- are here, as is their application. But the task may still seem daunting if you're putting together your first syllabus or radically revising your current one. The task of integrating the course around learning objectives is very different from the training we received at universities, where our research was guided by how things "are" (whatever that means). Few people systematically prepare young lecturers for teaching. There is one consolation: everybody else who is developing a course is in the same situation. We always lack essential information when we teach a course for the first time. We don't know

- the real entry-level
- the mental agility of the student body
- the success of our assignments, and the actual workload needed to complete them
- the final suitability of our assessments

We may be able to draw on some experience but to a certain extent we have to rely on guesses. The first syllabus (as any first strategy) therefore is like a hypothesis -- a proposition we put forward to be tested.[17] Before teaching it can make sense to submit this syllabus to a colleague or mentor. This colleague or mentor should be able to give constructive criticism (giving it to people who are routinely negative will only endanger your relationship with them), asking very specific questions on which you want to receive feedback. These colleagues obviously should understand the principle of syllabus as strategy and contract, otherwise their feedback may not respond to the way you set up your syllabus. Still, even they will not be able to clarify some of the essential information above. There are three ways of evaluating your strategy:

1.) put together an evaluation sheet for students, distributed at the end of the course and ask questions that you want answered:
   a) what did students feel they learnt in the course?
   b) what did they find least worthwhile?
   c) Which assignments did they like best?
   d) What improvements would they suggest?

These are only some of the questions you can ask. By phrasing the questions well, you can allow students to express suggestions without having them slip into direct criticism.[18] However, brace yourself: there always is at least one person giving comments that will make your blood pressure rise, even if you have received very positive feedback from others.

2.) Ask a trusted colleague (see above) to give you feedback, or simply evaluate yourself, debriefing yourself what you thought about the teaching situations, your feelings (if you don't "feel" good about it, something is not right), how you interpret the achievements and what needs to be done.[19]

3.) Look very closely at how students' performance matches the learning objectives. If there are great discrepancies, ask which part of the contract and strategy needs to be improved:

---

[17] I mean this in Popper's sense, see Karl Raimund Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1992)

[18] For extensive suggestions regarding evaluations see Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Learning, Teaching & Assessment* , pp. 255-272

[19] Christine Hogan, *Facilitating Learning: Practical Strategies for College and University* (Melbourne: Eruditions Publishing, 1999), pp. 107-110

a) raising the entry-level?
b) adjusting the learning objectives? Reducing their number? Lowering their ambition? Or increasing them to push students harder?
c) adjust assessment? Closer to learning objectives? Different type? More regular? More challenging in the beginning?
d) changing assignments? More? Different? Harder? More interesting? Higher proportion of the grade?
e) reorganizing sequence? Making it more exciting? Explaining details in the beginning?
f) adapting resources? Changing essential reading? Improvising new materials? Using case studies?
g) tightening course policies? Being stricter? Involving students more? Dismissing students from the course? Or more relaxed, to create a more pleasant atmosphere? Having a social event at some point? Visiting a museum together?

If you go through these questions and approaches, you will be able to move from a basic hypothesis to a highly nuanced approach to teaching. As in a strategy and contract, they improve greatly through experience. And by being good and methodical, you can turn yourself into an even better teacher than you are now.

Answers to Some Objections

This is nice in theory, but I'm being paid by the hour of teaching. I only lose time if I set assignments and control them. I need to feed my family. Why should I make the effort?[20]

You should still make the effort to develop a strategy. Presumably you are teaching because you like enhancing what students can do. You will enjoy students doing well. If you are indifferent to that, some would say that you should consider changing your profession to something that you really enjoy. Alternatively, remember that being a very good teacher may give you further chances in the future, either within your institution or at other institutions.

You are absolutely right that your strategy should be adapted to context and your needs. Try to create assignments that are easy to correct. Put a lot of the work into the class itself, so that you don't need to do so much work outside of it. Fight to have more teaching hours with the same class. Look into active learning and group work methods.

Adjust your learning objectives downward. If your students are being taught 20 hours per week, they are unlikely to be able to do a lot of assignments outside of class.

Doesn't Plato somewhere talk about the special moment of teaching? Doesn't this emphasis on coherence and integration kill what great teaching is about?

I have a lot of sympathy with this objection. Some of my best moments of teaching were with Philip Windsor and Michael Banks, both of whom would digress liberally from the main topic. But realistically, most of us (including me) are not Philip Windsor, Michael Banks, let alone Plato. Nor do we always teach very exciting courses. So there is a reason for getting the syllabus integrated on a technical level. I believe that a good, coherent framework does not stand in the way of local (or "tactical") spontaneity. It means a few hours of hard work, and thereafter many years of enjoyable teaching on increasingly sophisticated platforms. With the most brilliant students, we can often go beyond the syllabus. But again, these students are the exception. Ideally, such a syllabus shifts a lot of preparation and work to the students. This allows lecturers to do other things they enjoy, including talking to students individually. And the best students, again, can do their own thing. I personally therefore find such a structure liberating -- once it is created.

This sounds reasonably interesting, but I have heard too little about suitable assessment methods.

You're absolutely right! There will be something more detailed about assessment methods, but I have not finished this text yet. However, you will find extensive material on the Internet comparing assessment methods. The same, incidentally, is true for learning objectives. I have already written on that but not yet published the manuscript.

Would it not be right to say that the syllabus is always a hypothetical contract and strategy? Is it not always open to revision?

Strictly speaking I agree. We keep learning all the time, but this would have overloaded the structure

---

[20] On the range of post-Soviet Higher Education pathologies Andreas Umland, "Teaching Social Sciences at a Post-Soviet University: A Survey of Challenges for Visiting Lecturers in the Former USSR," *European Political Science*, no. 4 (2005)

of this essay. Also, the component of hypothesis focuses on the process of testing and improving, while the quality of contractual and strategic arrangements ultimately define the quality of the syllabus itself. Therefore they deserve more attention.

All very good, but how does the syllabus fit into the program context? Is there a similar approach for setting up a program?

Yes, there is such an approach, and we have tried it out successfully. My suggestion for setting up programs is to do an analysis of the *existing* strengths and weaknesses and then the *potential* opportunities and threats of setting up a new program. This process should be very comprehensive and well-moderated. In particular, the moderator needs to keep the integrated whole together. How do, for example, the risks relate to actual preparation activity and program offerings? It is, essentially, a comprehensive top-down planning process. The best description of planning I have found so far is in a business book by Richard Stutely, but the entire approach is transferable.[21]

Are the strategic and contractual components not really set out by the curriculum, rather than having to be defined by the syllabus?

A broader framework may indeed be defined by the curriculum and departmental policies on various issues (including assessment, grading, attendance, and several more). However, lectures should fully understand strategy and contract so that they can make the most of the framework provided for them.

How much of the strategy really needs to be included in the syllabus? Can we not keep the syllabus to the very contractual minimum, not least to guarantee flexibility?

Ultimately, lecturers will need to articulate a strategy for reaching learning outcomes. This can not be improvised from day to day, from lecture to lecture. It must be a comprehensive process that does not miss out on essential components and must include conscious decisions regarding learning arrangements, not least with regards to that tactics, assessment and feedback. The reason why I would be reluctant about keeping too much of the strategy out of the syllabus is that there is a risk that this effectively eliminates conscious reflection about the strategy itself, unless there is a separate course diary or teaching outline reflecting experience. Although often abused as an argument against rigor, some flexibility, as stated above, certainly is part of any good strategy. Moreover, the first time a course is taught it inevitably will require more adaptation, especially if it has a heavy skills component.

Teaching complex skills? Is this not too ambitious? Should individuals not adapt to what they themselves can teach? It should work for them.

Indeed, the strategy should be adapted to individual abilities. That's precisely what this essay is for. Lecturers should ask themselves what they can do and do this as well as they can. This requires systematic reflection: setting out intended outcomes and steps of working towards these outcomes is one of the best ways of reflecting on this complex question. It is a multi-faceted learning process: in and through the course students learn, but lecturers also learn what they can teach.

---

[21] Stutely, *The Definitive Business Plan: The Fast-Track to Intelligent Business Planning for Executives and Entrepreneurs*

Berman, Harold Joseph. *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Danielson, Mary Ann. "The Role of the Course Syllabi in Classroom Socialization." Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association, Indianapolis 1995.

Davidson, Sylvie. *Rooted in Tradition, Experimenting with Innovation*, 2000 Fall]. Available from http://www.dickinson.edu/magazine/fall00/articles/rooted.html.

Fletcher, Lancelot. *Slow Reading Lists and the Meaning of Slow Reading*, 1994 [cited July 2005. Available from http://www.freelance-academy.org/slowread.htm.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Count Again*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Gutbrod, Hans. "Wie Vermittelt Man Urteilskraft? Die Essaymethode

an Georgischen Universitäten." In *Geistes- Und Sozialwissenschaftliche Hochschullehre in Osteuropa: Eindrücke, Erfahrungen Und Analysen an Universitäten Des Ehemaligen Sowjetblocks*, edited by Andreas Umland, 322 leaves. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2005.

Hogan, Christine. *Facilitating Learning: Practical Strategies for College and University*. Melbourne: Eruditions Publishing, 1999.

Huitt, W. *Bloom Et Al.'S Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain.*, 2004 [cited July 2005. Available from http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/cogsys/bloom.html.

Jacques, David. *Learning in Groups: A Handbook for Improving Group Work*. London: Kogan Page, 2001.

Johnson, Roy. *What Is Close Reading?* , 2004 [cited July 2005]. Available from http://www.mantex.co.uk/samples/closeread.htm.

Kain, Patricia. *How to Do a Close Reading*, 1998 [cited July 2005]. Available from http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html.

Popper, Karl Raimund. *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Race, Philip. *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Learning, Teaching & Assessment*. 2nd ed. London, Sterling, VA: Kogan Page; Stylus Pub., 2001.

Steps for Close Reading or Explication De Texte: Patterns, Polarities, Problems, Paradigm, Puzzles, Perception, 2005 [cited July 2005]. Available from http://theliterarylink.com/closereading.html.

Stutely, Richard. *The Definitive Business Plan: The Fast-Track to Intelligent Business Planning for Executives and Entrepreneurs*. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2002.

Umland, Andreas. "Teaching Social Sciences at a Post-Soviet University: A Survey of Challenges for Visiting Lecturers in the Former USSR." *European Political Science*, no. 4 (2005): 219-29.

Windsor, Philip. "The Twentieth Century as Self-Conscious History." In *Experiencing the Twentieth Century*, edited by Hagihara Nobutoshi, Akira Iriye, Georges Nivat and Philip Windsor, 333-56. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1985.

Review Questions
Syllabus as Contract and Strategy

These review questions are intended to give you some questions to review the main points of this essay. You can use it to check whether you have grasped the main items of information, but also as reading aid. For best effect, write down the answers!

Conversely, you can ask these questions to colleagues to illustrate to them that there is some information which they may not have yet.

1. List some uses of having a strategy.

2. List some advantages of working with a contract.

3. List some of the risks of not having either a strategy or a contract written down.

4. Who is the contract between?

5. Which of the items/headings would you consider the centerpiece of a syllabus?

6. What is important when phrasing learning objectives?

7. What is the relationship between learning objectives and assessment methods?

8. If you are intending that students do effective presentations of complex materials, what type of assessment would be useful?

9. Describe one case of using assessment methods for very specific objectives (from your own practice, or from the essay).

10. Which assessment method in many cases primarily tests people's ability to mobilize resources, such as friends, to complete the task?

11. What are the five steps of teaching skills?

12. List five effective ways of giving feedback that save you time.

13. What aspects do course policies typically cover?

14. Where is there a slight tension between strategy and contract? Why?

15. Why could it be said that a the first syllabus is like a hypothesis? How do you evaluate this hypothesis?

16. What is the main thing you learnt from this essay that you previously did not yet know?

17. Which of the practical suggestions from this essay can you apply immediately in your teaching?

Exercises

These are some provisional suggestions for developing your skills in setting up syllabi. You can use this by yourself, or with others.

1. Develop a checklist for syllabi from the material you have here. Feel free to send this checklist to me at hans.gutbrod@gmx.net and I will send you the checklist that I have come up with. I deliberately did not include it because you will learn most by drawing up your own checklist.

2. Following from what you have read in this essay, draw up a syllabus for teaching how to draw up a syllabus. I would be grateful if you send me this syllabus because I want to collect some of them, so that we can share and exchange experience.

3. Take four syllabi and rank them in order of quality -- how they perform as contract and strategy. Try and identify at least one item in each syllabus that you find positive. Phrase your criticisms in terms of constructive suggestions for improvement. (Sources: take syllabi by colleagues, or from web sites; www.ceu.hu/crc/ is a rich source of some very good syllabi and others that still require improvement.)

4. Create a workgroup with colleagues and undertake the exercises together with them.

5. Vary these exercises in speed and depth. Engage in high speed identification of strengths and weaknesses of syllabi (no more than five minutes) to speed up your judgment and your ability to focus on the most important items as fast as possible.

6. Let students write the intended learning objectives.