287. Hands Off My Syllabus!

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The course outline or course syllabus is a teaching tool. Since it is a teaching tool, what it contains should be entirely up to the professor. Professors' prerogatives with regard to their syllabi should be protected by academic freedom guarantees.

Well, that's in an ideal world. In the real world, in order to balance what might be competing interests among students, professors and the university, perhaps some university senate guidelines are necessary. Even so, senates should legislate with a light hand.

The composing of syllabi used to be almost entirely entrusted to professors, but two or three decades ago, rules and regulations began to multiply. Today, at many universities, half or more of a course syllabus will be material that the university mandates. Senates might require that syllabi contain warnings regarding plagiarism, statements of learning outcomes, blurbs for the writing centre or student counseling services, directions for special needs students, or the university's safe-and-respectful campus policy. Professors might be instructed to include their preferred pronouns or an indigenous land acknowledgement.

At some universities, professors are directed to follow a template when constructing a syllabus. This is to ensure uniformity in both content and appearance across the university. Sometimes, professors must submit their syllabi in advance to the dean for approval.

Professors who wish to beef up their syllabi with plagiarism warnings and the rest should, of course, be free to do so. No professor should be forced to include any of this material, though.

For my part, I want my syllabi to be short and plain. A short, plain syllabus helps create the classroom atmosphere that I like. We're in class to discuss philosophical problems, and a bare-bones syllabus with no distractions helps to signal that.

I don't include a warning against plagiarism. I think, first, that it is presumptuous and insulting to do so. Even plagiarism statements dressed up to look like simple information to guide the perplexed carry the suggestion that students are cheaters and the professors are watching them. I also find that many of my students have been scared to death by all the warnings. They are so worried about unintentionally plagiarizing something that they won't include interesting points or relevant arguments in their essays if they can't remember the source and aren't sure they came up with them on their own.

The current emphasis on learning outcomes reflects the success of a particular theory of university teaching and the mission of the university. Not its academic success, but its success in propagating itself. Learning outcomes listed on the syllabus tend to follow a standard form: "By the end of this

course, students: will have acquired knowledge of the categorical imperative; will have come to value group decision making; [and so on through two or three more bullet points]."

Lists of learning outcomes misconstrue my pedagogical goals, perhaps because I lack any. Save for the logic courses I teach, where I am, more or less, trying to purvey information, I'm there just to help the students talk about the matter at hand. My courses begin with philosophical problems, and our concern is to try to solve them by talking about them. I can reasonably expect that many of my students will learn something or other and acquire or develop skills, but our focus is on the problems we discuss. Learning-outcomes pedagogies mislead the students into thinking the course is about them rather than the task.

Other professors, even in philosophy, have different pedagogical goals and methods and may well subscribe to learning-outcomes theory. Requiring that all professors state learning outcomes, though, tends toward standardization and uniformity across the university. That's bad if universities are to encourage individual development, for we develop as individuals when we choose for ourselves from a variety of options with which we are acquainted. It also creates student expectations ("What are the learning outcomes for this course?") that professors might not want to serve.

A long, standardized, formal syllabus can appear to a student to be a contract, one that can be altered only with the consent of all parties. Professors, though, might decide while teaching to expand a section or drop one, to add a couple surprise tests, or to ask that instead of a third essay, students submit a rewritten second essay. When professors exercise their judgement and depart from their original plans, students can think themselves ill-used.

Nothing I have said implies that professors should be indifferent to their colleagues' pedagogical choices. Indeed, they should not. A university might have an in-house journal of teaching and learning in which professors can criticize ineffective or unwise pedagogical options (they need not name the professors they wish would change their ways). It might have a center that organizes or sponsors presentations and discussions at which people can exchange views regarding syllabi.

So long as they act on the decisions of academic senates, universities probably can require that for each course taught at the institution, the professor provide a syllabus, that it be distributed on the first day of class, and that it contain a grading scheme. This might, of course, be like requiring that professors bathe regularly and speak up in class. Almost all of us think that handing out a syllabus is a good idea, and we don't need to be ordered to write or distribute one. Having a rule can make sense only if those who reject the good idea thereby put something valuable at risk.

The fact is, though, that many students want to know right away when tests will be held, what they are to read, what the assignments will demand, and what the grading scheme is. They might not need to know any of this the first day, week or month in order for the course to go well, but if they can't find out, they might elect to go elsewhere. That is why it is not only a good idea to pass out a sheet at the beginning of term that contains this information but it is also perhaps wise of universities to insist that this information be on the sheet. If the risk of losing students to other departments or institutions is high, then the collective can insist that the outlier gets in line. (But is the risk high?)

Attracting and keeping students by honouring one of their preferences is not an *academic* justification for university oversight of syllabi, of course. But minimal oversight might nonetheless be all-things-considered warranted.

What's warranted academically, though, is "Hands Off!" Universities and their academic senates should recognize that syllabi are teaching tools and that for the sake of education, professors need to enjoy wide academic freedom in teaching.

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