Some Tips on Designing Course Syllabi

All of the suggestions below involve allocating class time for:

- active learning
- reflection on reading
- discussion of writing assignments
- preparation for special events and experiences.

Experts on learning maintain that 60-70% of course content should be acquired out of class and then actively engaged with during class time.

Start with Learning Outcomes

A syllabus should always be constructed to achieve the stated learning outcomes for the course. (See Tewksbury and Macdonald, “A Practical Strategy...”). Every course will have learning outcomes derived from different sources: your department, which defines the learning outcomes for its majors or, if it is a Common Curriculum course, from the Standing Committee on the Common Curriculum, which has devised learning outcomes for all CC courses. Your course will also include the learning outcomes that you, as course designer and instructor, want to see your students achieve.

To plan your course/syllabus, begin with these learning outcomes in mind and “build your course backward”—that is, do not start out with a list of texts you want to teach or a body of material you want to cover. Start out with a careful look at the learning outcomes you want your students to achieve and think about what content, approaches, and pedagogy will be most effective in making that happen.

Remember that our goal as Loyola professors is to develop our students’ abilities to think critically and to help them grow into men and women with and for others. Every time we design a syllabus, we should be focusing on these twin goals and asking ourselves, “how can I involve students in thinking critically about this material? How can I raise their awareness of the issues of justice and injustice inherent in this material?”

Thinking Critically

What do we mean by thinking critically? There are many definitions, but here are some things all definitions have in common: being able to distinguish facts from inferences, evaluate source material, weigh evidence, formulate a logical argument, generate relevant questions about material, come up with alternative solutions to a problem, decide, based on evidence at hand, the best solution to a problem.

Notice that the items in this list describe actions, not passive learning. “Distinguish, evaluate, formulate, generate, and so forth.” We cannot teach students to do these things by lecturing to them. We have to involve students in practicing these skills, as they master the content of the course. **It is a good idea to build into your syllabus time for critical thinking exercises and discussions that ask students to involve themselves in the actions involved in critical thinking.** You will find that setting aside time to do these things does not detract from contract mastery but actually contributes to it. See below for links to critical thinking exercises on the web.

Most students, simply because of their age and cognitive development, enter college as what the experts call “dualistic thinkers.” That is, they think in black and white terms, believing that there is a
right and wrong answer to each question and that you, as the professor, have that right answer. They want you to give it to them! In many cases, there IS a right answer to the question and you will need to provide it. In others, however, the question generates shades of gray. In these cases, it is important to lead students away from dualistic thinking into an exploration and evaluation of multiple answers and explanations. You should build in class time for this exploration as well.

Encouraging Critical Reading

In addition, many students do not know how to read critically. First-year seminars and introductory courses are expected to focus on this skill. You may find, however, that you need to build class time into your syllabus to guide your students’ reading, first, by modeling critical reading through annotation of passages, formulation of questions, summary of main points, and comparison to other texts and later, by giving students time to show through writing assignments and class discussion that they are applying these techniques to their reading. Because many students do need help with critical reading (whether of texts, images, films), they often do not know what they’re looking for. Consider giving them even a few “leading” questions to guide each reading assignment or film.

If you assign a different, new reading for every class period, your students may not have time to practice critical reading skills in class, and you may not have time to check and see whether they are assimilating the material. Create some space by reserving days without assigned readings from time to time.

Create Assignments to Achieve those Outcomes

In addition to readings, short lectures, class discussion, and active learning exercises, the following types of assignments help students achieve these outcomes:

- Informal writing assignments (microthemes, blogs, discussion board posts, journals, etc.) in which students respond to questions, evaluate information, or formulate questions themselves based on readings and class discussions

- Formal writing assignments (short papers) in which students formulate and defend a thesis. Many students will not know how to create a thesis statement, without which the paper will be a muddle. It is worthwhile to spend class time discussing effective/ineffective thesis statements and how they could be supported before having the students write a first draft.

- Formal writing assignments done in segments. Breaking down a writing task into a few discrete components helps students “think their way through” that task. Consider assigning formal papers in these separate steps:
  a. assignment 1) create a thesis and explain what you would need to support/defend it
  b. assignment 2) turn in (X # of) items you will use to support the thesis (along with cites);
  c. assignment 3) turn in the body of the essay (2 – 3 pages)
  d. assignment 4) turn in the intro and conclusion
  e. assignment 5) revise all and turn in whole paper

- Fewer formal assignments with required revision develop students’ writing skills far more effectively than more numerous assignments without revision. In fact, informal writing assignments combined with a single formal writing assignment, done in segments and/or with revisions, may be ideal.
• Library research assignments, presented orally or in writing. Each seminar is assigned a library liaison who will help the instructor develop short research assignments appropriate for first-year students.

• Presentations with media (web pages, wikis, PowerPts) created as group or individual projects.

John Bean offers numerous other ideas in his excellent book, Engaging Ideas: The Professors’ Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom. Jossey Bass, 2001. We have several copies on the Center for Faculty Innovation bookshelf, Library 3rd floor. Loyola faculty who have used this book are enthusiastic in praising its usefulness.

Pacing Writing Assignments and Giving Feedback

Students do not learn much about either writing skills or content by writing long papers turned in at semester’s end without instructor feedback. So pacing your writing assignments to incorporate frequent writing and instructor feedback will boost their skills and content mastery. Consider the suggestion above to break long assignments into segments and have students discuss their progress in class as they complete each section. Allot time for class discussion of students’ thesis statements (this can improve the final product considerably). Grade or comment on each section to incentivize student effort. When they turn in their long paper at the end for a final grade, they will have benefitted from discussion and instructor feedback along the way. Or assign short papers and require revision. Provide handouts to guide their revision in ways that will deepen their thinking about the topic, not simply correct sentence structure and grammar. Call the WAC Writing Center. They will be happy to help your students with revision.

Balance the Course Elements

Set aside class time for students to process. While students are learning to think in new ways, they need time to process their reading and writing assignments as well as the lectures you give. Some ways to promote this processing:

• Rather than lecturing for a full period, consider doing so for 20 minutes, then stop, give the students some questions about your lecture, ask them to write for a few minutes, then discuss. You can have them do this individually or in groups. This technique will help you find out whether they are understanding key points in your lecture.

• When you assign a reading, always set aside class time for students to work with it, either via discussion, short writing, or active learning exercises.

• If you assign out-of-class activities (field trips, films, etc), always set aside class time before the event to explain what you expect them to learn from it and after the event to give them time to discuss/work with what they learned.

• When you pass back papers/comment on blogs, discussion boards etc/critique presentations, always allow students time to ask questions about your comments. If you have built in revision to the assignment, allow them time to begin preliminary revision on the spot.

• When you assign oral presentations, build in extra days. Sometimes presentations run long and you run out of time; almost always, a student or group will show up unprepared or not show up at all on presentation day—you’ll have to decide whether to give them another day to do it and
lower the grade or give them a zero. If you choose the former, you will need the extra days in the schedule.

Make Expectations Very Clear

Be as clear as possible about expectations and assignments. State in no uncertain terms your attendance policy and penalties, policies on accepting late papers (and consequences for such), policies on iPods, cell phones, laptops in class, policies on cheating and plagiarism. Indicate the due dates for papers and other important assignments and do your best to stick to these dates. If you’re planning out-of-class events, do so after talking with your students—many of them have conflicts with other courses on the days/times you plan. Many work on and off-campus. Many will not be able to come at all, so in addition to scheduling these events as best you can to accommodate students, always offer an alternative for those who can’t come: a different time to watch the film; a short paper instead of a field trip, etc. If you plan out-of-class events, list the event, along with date and location, so that there are no surprises for students. This will help them learn to manage their time. In addition, take time the first day to go over the syllabus, explain that they must learn what is on it and consult it often.

Include Statement on Common Curriculum if Applicable

Students don’t enter Loyola understanding the Common Curriculum, so if you are teaching a CC course, explain the curriculum and why they are taking it. On First-Year Seminar syllabi, we ask all instructors to include the following statement at the beginning of the syllabus:

**The Common Curriculum and the First-Year Seminar**
In addition to your major, you will take a broad range of courses in the liberal arts and sciences known as the Common Curriculum (CC). The CC offers an educational experience unique to Loyola. The CC

- Includes courses in English, history, philosophy, religious studies, the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the arts;
- Teaches important foundational subject matter;
- Provides a broad education beyond the major and thus prepares students for the demands of a complex world
- Is grounded in the core values of Loyola’s Jesuit mission and identity;
- Develops students’ understanding of human values and social justice; and
- Develops students’ critical thinking, writing, and speaking skills

You may want to use or adapt this statement for your CC course syllabus.

Required Elements for Loyola Course Syllabi

All syllabi must contain certain common elements: a statement about the University’s emergency/evacuation policy, a statement about students with disabilities, your grading criteria, and other things. These requirements are listed on the master syllabus template found on the Provost’s website: http://academicaffairs.loyno.edu/syllabus-templates. You will also find the Continuity of Operations Plan on the Provost’s website, which is essential because students must participate in the course online if a lengthy evacuation occurs: http://academicaffairs.loyno.edu/continuity-operations-plans.
Summary

To summarize,

- Build your syllabus guided by your learning outcomes
- Build in time to have students do critical thinking exercises and apply what they have learned from them to discussion of course content
- Emphasize critical thinking throughout the course
- Do not plan to lecture all day every day. Lecture for 20 minutes or so, do an exercise to see if they understand your lecture, circle back if they do not
- Leave space in your syllabus to check your students’ critical reading skills. Give them time to share the questions they’re come up with and discuss the way they have annotated assigned texts
- Segment your writing assignments and/or assign short assignments with required revision. Include required elements and explain them to students
- Allot class time to discussion of their writing

Good luck! Using these tips, you will create course syllabi that improve student learning.