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Introduction to "The State of the Syllabus" Special Edition

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INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF THE SYLLABUS

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INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF THE SYLLABUS

The syllabus plays multiple roles in academe: it serves as a guide to a course for students; an intellectual provocation; a description of a field; a representation of scholarship; a contract. With the advent of projects such as the [Open Syllabus Project](#) and repositories such as [Humanities CORE](#), along with the use of social media by academics to share their work, the syllabus has emerged as an open and connected space for conversation and argument. It renders pedagogical labor visible as it is shared, along with other materials, in repositories and social media streams.

Positioning the syllabus as a key artifact in the modern academy, one that encapsulates many elements of intellectual, scholarly, social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts in which it is enmeshed, we offer in this special issue of *Syllabus* a set of provocations on the syllabus and its many roles. Including perspectives from full-time and part-time faculty, graduate students, and librarians, the issue offers a multifaceted take on how the syllabus is presently used and might be reimagined.

We have asked the contributors to this issue to offer short takes on complex questions, and to write their articles as "flash essays" -- pieces of writing that offer brief and pointed challenges to various aspects of the syllabus. Each contributor was asked to write a piece of roughly 500 words and to fill in "The Syllabus as ____." We believe that the answers our contributors have put together will inspire continued thinking on the nature of the syllabus and some of the new directions in which we might take it.

This issue builds upon not only recent work in *Syllabus*, but also on a number of scholarly publications that have begun to engage the syllabus in new ways (see, in addition to *Syllabus*, the journals [Pedagogy](#), [The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy](#), and [Hybrid Pedagogy](#), as well as MLA's [Humanities CORE database](#) and our 2020 Modern Language Association publication, [Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities](#), which contains 79 syllabi). This cluster of flash essays also builds upon ongoing conversations in social media, such as the [#citepedagogy](#) and [#curateteaching](#) hashtag discussions on Twitter. Across all of these venues, we see syllabi being created and shared in new ways.

Within these flash essays, we see a tension between individual and collaborative creation. While we might expect the syllabus to be the unique creation of one instructor, our contributors have portrayed the syllabus as a shared construction between instructor and students, between instructor and previous instructors, between department members, or between members of the public in response to a crisis.

Can the syllabus as a unique product of the instructor's expertise accommodate such sharing? Perhaps the instructor's unique creation is actually an imposition of power in the classroom as Matthew Cheney argues. Many of our contributors show how the syllabus, as an instrument of power can instead be used to share power within the classroom and beyond.

The purpose of a syllabus has implications on format--once created, is it fixed or changeable? Several of its uses imply that it should not change. As a legal document full of policies that cover every eventuality, as a document for accreditation, and even as a table of contents, it should be stable. But as the expression of shared community, the syllabus evolves along with the community and has become a representation of scholarship and a space for underrepresented voices, as argued by Nicky Agate, Rebecca Kennison, Christopher P. Long, Jason Rhody, Simone Sacchi, Penny Weber. The digital syllabus accommodates such change through versioning, but it also creates more work. As syllabuses are disaggregated across course shells in learning management systems, instructors are still required to submit unified documents for accreditation.

No matter how it is created, the syllabus is an act of communication, and many of our contributors present concepts of the syllabus that take different views of the rhetorical situation. Who is the audience? Who is the speaker? What is the genre and purpose? What is the time of this communication?

Issues of speaker and audience may seem straightforward--surely it is a communication from instructor to student as Matthew Cheney describes? But both Matthew K. Gold and Angela Sorby find a place for the student's voice in the syllabus by contributing to its evolution or interpreting it through the addition of hand-made annotations. Brian Croxall sees the syllabus communicating to an audience of colleagues and perhaps even tenure and promotion committees, and we all know our syllabi are collected by the department, university, then passed on to accrediting agencies. For Ethan Knight, the syllabus becomes a communication from the department back to the instructor when it is handed over to new instructors. The activist syllabus can be a communication from community educators and organizers to the broader public.

In terms of time, we tend to think of the syllabus as situated at the beginning of the semester looking forward, but Brian Croxall argues that the syllabus looks backwards at its sources. Time is also an issue with the activist syllabus described by Andrea Quaid, where we get the just-in-time syllabus that responds to current events and overturns the established curriculum and perhaps even the canon.

Since we initiated this special edition of *Syllabus*, the timing and the mutability of the syllabus as communication has been underlined by current events. The COVID-19 pandemic has overwhelmed faculty who scrambled to move their Spring 2020 courses completely online while universities and colleges all over the United States closed to halt the spread of this virus. In the wake of that hasty move, instructors typically had one week to translate their in-person class sessions to asynchronous, synchronous, or distributed learning models. Consequently, the #covidcampus Twitter hashtag erupted with just-in-time pedagogy to convert to online learning. The syllabus, too, for all instructors, was forced to become a somewhat malleable document of fluid policies. Amid the pandemic, instructors highlighted the need for care of students, attention to privacy issues, and flexibility in grading policies.

Many of the flash essays, such as those by Julie Bezzerides, Marlowe Daly-Galeano, and Spencer Payton's request for a syllabus as inclusive practice and Matthew Applegate's declaration that the syllabus is a manifesto, anticipated this need for moving from the syllabus as a rigid policy document to

a student-centered, collaborative, living document that embraces the 21st-century requirements of higher education. In a similar way, Ahmed Yousof advocates for a graphic-based document that is aligned with the visual learner of today's college classroom. Mani García suggests that such student-centered focus is possible by considering the syllabus as a living, social contract.

Ultimately, speaker, audience, and time, all depend on the purpose of the syllabus--a topic on which our contributors take different views. Both Brian Croxall and Andrea Quaid describe the syllabus as an entry into the scholarly conversation. Croxall's discussion implies that pedagogical creations are examples of scholarship, and Agate, Kennison, Long, Rhody, Sacchi, and Weber would concur. Andrea Quaid's discussion of the activist syllabus defines a new sub-genre, which itself becomes an object of study. In both cases, the syllabus carries the potential to impact the canon and change the scholarly conversation. With this purpose, the activist syllabus is not so much a communication to the general public as to academia itself, urging us to redefine the curriculum.

Even as we put time and effort into crafting our syllabi, they are sometimes treated by students as End User License Agreements (EULA), to be checked off without careful reading--an argument made by Sarah Whitcomb Laiola in this issue. Syllabi, in this sense, might be understood as a metaphor for the breakdown of communication between academia and the world beyond the ivory tower. We invest so much in our syllabi but suspect that our students aren't reading them as closely as we write them. There is a mismatch between the purposes we have for these documents and the ways that students use them. We try to include everything about the course, but our students just want a list of books and due dates. Academics have so much expertise to share with the public, but increasingly we feel discounted, ignored, and undervalued.

The syllabus is not a genre that most would read, but this cluster of essays suggests that it should be read and re-read closely, intentionally, and critically--not least of all by those of us writing them at the beginning of the semester or re-writing them during a global pandemic. Perhaps, as we do so, we can begin to repair our conversations not only with our students, but also with the public at large. It's an ambitious goal for a ubiquitous and often-overlooked document of the academy, but for that very reason it holds great promise for change.