

(In) Justice and Equity in the Classroom – Foundations and Strategies for Inclusive Pedagogy

Effective Syllabus Audits

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1) Guiding Principles.

“The policies we choose to include in our syllabus – and the way we frame required policies – reflect our values, and convey to students how we see them as learners and citizens in our classroom. For that reason, and where we have the latitude to do so, it can be useful to frame these policies in our own voices, rather than simply using department boilerplate language, thereby giving students an accurate image of how we would like to work with them.” - University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching (2017)

“The best teachers are good burglars, contextually attuned plunderers—they are always on the lookout for something they haven’t tried before that, with a few adaptations, will work with their students.” - Stephen D. Brookfield (2011:x)

2) Course Design Questions to Guide Syllabus Development (Modified from Ross 2016).

a) Whom [not what] are we teaching?

b) What are the students’ concerns and needs?

c) What messages do we want our syllabi to convey?

d) What messages do we not want our syllabi to convey?

3) Syllabus Components (Sometimes verbatim from Atkinson and Lowney 2016; Nilson 2010).

- a) Basics – Course name/number and term; Curricular requirements course satisfies; Course location(s) and time(s); Credit hours; Instructor (title, PGPs, office); Office hours; Contact(s) and response policies; TAs; Web presence and/or LMS; Course description; Prerequisites; Grade calculation and distribution.
- b) Learning Goals and Outcomes.
- c) Required Readings, Purchases, and Subscriptions.
- d) Required Assignments – Clarify assignment details with web links; day-by-day schedule; institutional dates and deadlines; due dates and submission methods.
- e) Class Policies (for learning) – Behaviors encouraged or “controlled.”
 - a. “Rights of the Student” (Heidebrink-Bruno 2014).
 - i. Accessibility – “Official policy” as minimum standard.
 - ii. Classroom Decorum and Academic Discourse.
 - 1. University of Michigan: “A positive learning environment relies upon creating an atmosphere where diverse perspectives can be expressed, especially in a course that focuses on pressing and controversial social and political issues. Each student is encouraged to take an active part in class discussions and activities. Honest and respectful dialogue is expected. Disagreement and challenging of ideas in a supportive and sensitive manner is encouraged. Hostility and disrespectful behavior is not acceptable. Just as we expect others to listen attentively to our own views, we must reciprocate and listen to others when they speak, especially when we disagree with them. However, in this class, our emphasis will be on engaging in the mutual exploration of issues as presented in the course readings as scholars rather than in defending points of view we have formed outside the classroom” (Evelyn Alsutany, American Culture).
 - b. Attendance.
 - c. Religious and Cultural Observances.
 - i. University of Michigan: “Persons who have religious or cultural observances that coincide with this class should let the instructor know in writing (by e-mail for example) by [date]...”
 - d. Late Work.
 - e. Extra Credit.
 - f. Plagiarism.
 - g. Technology.
- f) Campus Support Services – software, writing, academic support, counseling, mental health, etc.
 - a. University of Michigan: “University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at (734) 764-8312 and <https://caps.umich.edu/> during and after hours, on weekends and holidays, or through its counselors physically located in schools on both North and Central Campus. You may also consult University Health Service (UHS) at (734) 764-8320 and

<https://www.uhs.umich.edu/mentalhealthsvcs>, or for alcohol or drug concerns, see www.uhs.umich.edu/aodresources. For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, visit: <http://umich.edu/~mhealth/>."

- b. University of Michigan: "Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender is a Civil Rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, etc. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find the appropriate resources here..."

g) (Optional) Teaching Philosophy and/or Instructor Background Information.

4) Self-Assessment: Selections from "Syllabus and Course Design" (Mostly verbatim from Brantmeier et al. 2017).

a) Syllabus Tone: Is the syllabus written in an inviting, friendly, and supportive tone, or is it mainly a list of rules and regulations?

Rules and regulations.

Inviting.

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b) Syllabus Perspectives: Does the syllabus on the whole communicate openness to multiple perspectives and experiences, or is it mainly focused on one perspective?

One perspective.

Multiple perspectives.

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c) Syllabus Appeal: Does the course description/introduction appeal to a variety of students and perspectives or does it mainly target one type of student?

One type of student.

Variety of students.

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d) Learning Objectives Diversity: To what extent do some of the learning objectives aim at diversity- or inclusion-related knowledge, skills, or attitudes?

No diversity-related objectives.

All objectives related to diversity.

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e) Assessment Variety: To what extent does the course employ a variety of assignments? Do the students have a variety of ways to show what they know? Or does the course rely on only few types of assignment?

One type of assignment.

Several types of assignments.

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f) Content Perspectives: To what extent do the course materials, such as readings, provide a full spectrum of perspectives on topics?

One perspective.

Wide variety of perspectives.

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g) Content Voice: To what extent does the course material represent a variety of voices?

One voice.

Wide variety of voices.

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h) Content Accessibility: To what extent is the course material accessible to all students, including those with disabilities? (For example, do visual media have subtitles, can online readings be recognized by screen readers, etc.)

Material not accessible.

All course material accessible.

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5) Steps Toward Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Syllabi (Mostly verbatim from Lyles 2017).

Level 0: Baseline. All syllabi include information on accommodations for disabled students, schedule conflicts, and religious holidays.

Level 1: Perform a self-assessment. “Critically read your syllabus and note if and where you address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion....The first and easiest change to make to your syllabus is adding information about campus resources available to students.”

Level 2: Make improvements to course descriptions. “The next level of improving your course involves reviewing the descriptive sections (the introduction, objectives, course format, policies, etc.) of your syllabus and focusing on how the course climate you create and the pedagogy you use does or does not address issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion.”

Level 3: Make improvements to fundamental course elements. “More substantial changes can be made to fundamental course elements such as the module topics, lecture topics, and course readings to integrate issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion into a classroom setting. These changes may require a restructuring of the course, but the resulting changes will actively engage students in developing and furthering their understanding of these issues.”

6) Strategies for More Inclusive Syllabi / Courses (Often verbatim from source if cited).

Leave blank for “Not possible or not likely.”

√ for “Already doing this.”

≈ for “I sort of do this, but it could be more explicit or visible.”

* for “I’d like to try this.”

- Avoid academic jargon and idioms like “assignment will not be a piece of cake” (Lyles 2017).
- Emphasize positive over punishing language; create invitations over commands (e.g., “I encourage you to...” instead of “I only accept...” (Tulane 2018).
- Clearly indicate your availability for consultation outside of class to students by including contact information, office hours and a welcoming statement in syllabi (Lyles 2017).
- Include a statement about preferred names, pronouns, and Personal Gender Pronouns (PGPs).
- Cut some syllabus material and hyperlink to information to not overwhelm readers (Tulane 2018).
- Amend the reading list to include more texts by a diverse collection of authors (Jenks and Saul 2018).
- Use full names rather than initials in reading lists (Jenks and Saul 2018).
- Add authors’ profile links to the electronic version of the syllabus so that authors are easier to look up, thus making their group membership salient (Jenks and Saul 2018).
- Avoid giving the impression that works by members of under-represented groups are marginal or less important by putting them in the final week of the class or making them optional rather than required (Jenks and Saul 2018).
- Put off requiring the newest edition of an expensive text for a year or two.
- Include open source texts or library-subscribed journal articles in the reading list instead of requiring a purchase.
- Include a statement on accommodations for expensive technology if required for the class (Lyles 2017).
- Avoid scheduling exams and major projects over religious holidays (Lyles 2017).
- Make due dates clear and avoid major changes that might disadvantage students with substantial work or family responsibilities (Lyles 2017).
- Consider creative ways of expanding deadlines, like using “time banks” or self-set deadlines (Tulane 2018).
- Build flexibility into grading distributions, like using grading contracts or contract weighing (Tulane 2018).
- Minimize scheduling out-of-class group collaboration that requires in-person meetings between students who might have work or family responsibilities (Lyles 2017).
- Include a section on studying strategies or guidelines. Or, write a course FAQ linked from the LMS.
- Write and verbally communicate clear make-up and absence policies so they don’t privilege students who are “brave” enough to ask for forgiveness or permission.
- Post the syllabus in three formats: Word, .html, and PDF (Atkinson and Lowney 2016).
- Avoid using “sloppy” PDF scans (Atkinson and Lowney 2016).
- Reformat your syllabus with smart headings and a searchable table of contents (Atkinson and Lowney 2016).
- Change all font to sans serif (Atkinson and Lowney 2016).

- Use black font on white backgrounds while avoiding blue hyperlinks (Atkinson and Lowney 2016).
- Apply principles of universal color design for visuals like pie charts (Tulane 2018).
- Emphasize text by underlining and not italicizing (Atkinson and Lowney 2016).
- Add “alternative text” or “tags” for images (Atkinson and Lowney 2016).
- Ensure that all assigned video content has closed captioning and/or transcripts.
- Visit Tulane’s Accessible Syllabus to learn how to restructure your document design so it’s more reader-friendly (<https://accessiblesyllabus.tulane.edu/text/>).
- Begin your syllabus with an Inclusive Learning Statement: “Your success in this class is important to me. We will all need accommodations because we all learn differently. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know as soon as possible. Together we’ll develop strategies to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course. I encourage you to visit the Office of Disability Services to determine how you could improve your learning as well. If you need official accommodations, you have a right to have these met. There are also a range of resources on campus, including the Writing Center, Tutoring Center, and Academic Advising Center” (Tulane 2018).
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7) References.

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