

Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything.

By William Germano & Kit Nicholls. (2020), 232 pages, ISBN: 9780691192208. \$24.95

Subject: How to be a better teacher

Useful for: Useful for anyone starting to teach or interested in improving their teaching.

Format: Chapters; with a list of further reading and index at the end of the book.

Reviewer's Comments:

On its face, *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document that Changes Everything* focuses on its titular document, the syllabus. But really, this is a book about course design that uses the syllabus as the vehicle for that discussion. It is a beautifully written book— each word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, feels pored over, agonizingly changed again and again until perfected—and easy to read. Each chapter starts with a series of reflective statements and questions, designed to get the reader thinking about the topics of the chapter.

The book then follows a trajectory through a class, using the syllabus to tease out each part of a course's design, but always returning to the syllabus as the core document, to the syllabus as "above all else, *a design for student work.*" (p. 13). Each chapter thus guides (albeit at a high level, in order to, in theory, address any subject of class) the reader through the process, navigating the pieces of course design the authors find most useful to discuss within the confines of the syllabus. Chapter 1 sets the stage, explaining why the authors chose to write a book focused on the syllabus and centering the student as the focus of the document and the course. This student-centered theme continues as the authors then shift toward explaining the syllabus as a pedagogical contract with students, creating the conditions of citizenship within the classroom. The focus in Chapter 3 then shifts to the concept of coursetime and using the syllabus as a tracker of chronological time while also allowing for the flexibility of moments of time within the classroom, while Chapter 4 dives into the reading list and the particular challenge of providing students with enough readings while also recognizing that there is never enough time to get through all of the readings that a teacher may wish to assign in a class.

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Ultimately, the authors argue, the goal is to demonstrate “the syllabus as key to making your job a tiny bit harder but much more effective” (p. 165). And so, Chapters 5 and 6 move into a discussion of assignments, light scaffolding, and grading, including ensuring fair evaluations and keeping assignments and grading within the coursetime, while Chapter 7 focuses on grading, leading, and learning from students in the classroom and in office hours through discussions and assessing participation. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses reflective teaching and creating a private syllabus on which you keep notes about your teaching as you move through the course, before ending in Chapter 9 with the syllabus as a theory of teaching.

Overall, the book provided an interesting approach to course design, with light references and beautiful prose. While some of its lessons, by nature of their breadth, may be difficult to practically translate into your own classroom, it does provide several useful points. It’s also a book that could easily be read and reread at different stages of a teacher’s experience, each time showing you different lessons or possibilities for changes. That said, for anyone who regularly teaches, it is a book worth reading and adding to your collection.

Reviewed by: Taryn Marks, Stanford University, in 2021.