SYLLABUS, THE GENRE

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PEER REVIEW AND TEACHING

My work as an administrator involves reading many syllabi – for accreditation and for curriculum approval. I was always bothered that some people capable of brilliant thought in their scholarship are satisfied with producing poor quality syllabi. Whenever I run across a thoughtful, creative syllabus, I am moved by those who just do it without much recognition. This journal is an attempt to recognize teaching by publishing the best syllabi, those that often go unrecognized.

It is well known that faculty evaluation policies tend to favor scholarship over teaching; it is especially true in most research-intensive universities. However, it is not clear why exactly this is the case. It is not as if universities do not want to improve the quality of teaching; they most certainly do. My hypothesis is that we simply lack good feedback and a recognition mechanism.

Blind peer review is a very old, imperfect, but generally very effective method of developing and maintaining a common understanding of quality. It is partly responsible for the establishment of the scientific method and the rise of the European civilization. The anonymous peer review provides a significant nudge, shaping the academic discourse over time. It has its drawbacks in the times of paradigm shifts, but not many would disagree that its overall effects are extremely significant.

When I review a paper, I don’t know who wrote it, so I am not beholden to assumptions, biases, and expectations. The judgment is between the Truth and me. I never know if it is a he or she, a high school student or a distinguished academic silverback. When I was younger, peer review-inspired rejections seemed to me arbitrary and unfair (I did not feel that way about reviewers who liked my work). With age, I came to treasure those anonymous interactions, even when they ended in rejection. When we do not know each other, the Truth can be indeed invited to the table. When I review a work anonymously, I don’t care if the author’s feelings get hurt, and won’t pay a price for souring relationships with him. We always lie and flatter those next to us because we are constantly working on reinforcing good relationships; those seem more important than the abstract truth. We can only be truly honest with strangers. Honesty and friendship are usually incompatible, contrary to the naïve belief in the opposite. Relationships get in the way of being truthful – they have to! People with very deep connections (real friends) can sometimes afford to tell the truth on important matters, but it is rather an exception than the rule.

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It is not clear why we do not apply the method that works so well in one area of our work to others. Why don’t we blindly review many more things: curriculum proposals, programs, course syllabi, reports, strategic plans – everything?

Well, let’s go back to teaching. Most college teaching occurs in the dark. The attempts to subject teaching to peer review are not new, and are rather common.² It usually happens within an institution, in the context of annual or comprehensive evaluation. Yet this process is remarkably different from evaluation of scholarship. Scholarship is reviewed blindly, and therefore the assessment of quality is more objective. It is difficult to observe someone else’s teaching without being noticed and identifying oneself. It is very expensive to bring an outside expert to judge the quality of teaching. Therefore, faculty relationships get in the way of accurate assessment of teaching. Student feedback is anonymous and may be a little more objective. However, students are not colleagues, and often cannot distinguish between the truly rigorous and the mean-spirited. Student evaluations are usually very good at identifying extremes – the worst and the best of the instructors, but are fairly weak for measuring nuances or providing informed and constructive feedback. They rarely can appreciate the thought that went into developing a course.

This journal extends the practice of blind peer review to teaching, at least in the planning and preparation domain, as conveyed by course syllabi. It is also an attempt to create a vehicle for recognition for outstanding college instructors. A number of journals publish essays and research on teaching in higher education, but very few instructors see their own teaching a primary area of scholarship. Yet everyone writes syllabi – some are better at it than others.

AUTHENTICITY

A number of authors who submitted their work for the first issue of this journal wondered if revisions suggested by peer reviewers would make their syllabi somehow not true – not the document actually used in class. Eventually I developed a response: think about it as your syllabus for the next semester, the one based on your previous experiences, but also something you are developing, improving. Otherwise, there is no point in publishing and improving. Yet we did not want to include any fantasy syllabi on courses the author did not actually teach. It is a balance yet again, an idealized, aspirational version of the real document.

The larger question remains. Syllabi we create for students are not designed to be published; they are not normally intended to make explicit the original thought of the professor. Creative and prudent thinking still shines through aplenty, but it is not always easy to see. I was hoping we could use the abstracts to provide some context for the syllabus, but it is unlikely to be sufficient. Within this first issue, we already tried two different ways of making the course authors’ think more explicitly. Both are ideas of the authors themselves. Alexander Maxwell and Jordan D. Rosenblum first wrote expository mini-essays about their respective course. Andrew Thomas McCarthy came up with the idea of inserting comment boxes throughout the syllabus for the author’s comments. We publish both of these

alternative formats to solicit feedback from the readers. It is clear that a syllabus for publication is not exactly identical to a syllabus for student use. These two genres are going to diverge, although the exact difference will be apparent later. The genre of a published syllabus is still emerging.

We were trying to preserve the original flavor and the voice of each syllabus writer to bring the diversity of conventions to the surface. As Susan B. Fink notes, syllabi exist for many different overlapping purposes, and there is no one common understanding of purpose and structure of syllabi. Even applying consistent layout to these syllabi felt like an imposition. Yes, the journal needs to look and sound uniformly. So we tried to strike a balance. The structures of all syllabi are very different, as are the level of detail, tone, voice, and even styles of references. The policy is: as long as you are consistent within your piece, we don’t care if this is MLA or APA or Chicago. Yet I still changed all spelling to American English; I just could not help it. Some choices we made were to accommodate the online medium. For example, all links are live, except for all those that died while the journal was in production. There is no need to number pages throughout the journal; this is a vestige of the printed world.

All syllabi have some sort of a course description, in most cases directly lifted from a catalog. This brings another interesting challenge to authenticity. Not a single course syllabus can be considered to be solely written by one author. Most of us start with a version of another syllabus we either inherit or borrow. The language of learning objectives or policies is often dictated by the institution, and if not, is freely borrowed. Of course the Bakhtinians and the Gadamerians will argue that any text is always already somebody else’s, and that the whole notion of authorship is questionable. But there is a difference between the level of originality as expressed in language of an essay, and the originality expressed in a syllabus. Once again, it is not clear what the difference is, but it is certainly there.

How do you know you are seeing a syllabus? The outward signs are unmistakable. They all have to explain major objectives, assignments, how those are going to be graded, what’s there to read and watch, and which policies are applied. But after that – the variety is enormous. Some people like a minimalistic sort of a syllabus; others include substantial reading guides, extensive rubrics, samples, and activities. The editors tried to be agnostic about the quality of submissions, especially in the areas outside of their own expertise. If reviewers said it was good or it was bad, who are we to question their judgment?

While it is common to celebrate the diversity of form, I am not so sure excessive diversity is necessarily all good. I believe college teaching as a field of practice may benefit from more consistency and clearer conventions. We need a standard of minimal quality across disciplines and institutions. Why? – Because we share the same students, who trod across campus to take classes from different departments, and who transfer between institutions with increased rates. They can often tell, even if they might not be able to explain, the difference between good and bad teaching. With information becoming universally accessible, the craft of teaching is what is going to save higher education from demise.

SEEKING FRIENDS

There is no natural community for this journal. No scholarly society can provide its membership list as potential reviewers. By definition, it is multi-disciplinary. Finding potential reviewers has proven to be a major challenge; it is the sole reason for delaying the publication of the first issue. We had to look for
people with similar teaching experiences online, and initiate a cold contact. This is not always kindly received, and surely slows things down.

There is more to it, however. Professors from different institutions do normally come together to talk about their teaching. They come to conferences to catch up on research and to gossip about university politics. It is not yet common to be a rigorous critic of each other’s teaching. We are faced with the long-term prospect of changing the culture of higher education. And those kinds of change are some of the most difficult. In my dream in some distant future, university schedules will make a distinction between a regular course and a peer-reviewed one. Let’s say there will be a little asterisk. And all will know this must be a better course.

The journal needs a supporting community. We need feedback; we need ideas; we need reviewers who can be counted on – in many areas. We need authors, readers, and champions on every campus. This project may not be as hip as flipped classrooms, mega classes, artificial intelligence tutors, or online universities. But bringing real peer review into teaching may have the longer lasting effect. So let’s get this revolution going.