


Chapter 7


The Anti–Syllabus as a Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Approach to Online Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Syllabi serve to clarify course expectations regarding assignments, policies, and other related tasks. Nevertheless, traditional syllabi often transform this important pedagogical resource into a lengthy contract between instructors and students. In this chapter, we propose that by utilizing culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) and sustaining (Paris, 2012) pedagogies, educators can reframe the purpose of the course syllabus. Through a collaborative inquiry process (Kennedy & Dana, 2022), we share insights from implementing the “anti-syllabus,” a flexible syllabus framework

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applied in various online graduate and undergraduate courses. We identify three prevalent themes from our inquiry that illustrate how a reimagined syllabus can function as a culturally responsive and sustaining asset for online education: (a) faculty adopting strategies to boost student engagement, (b) maintaining relevance while addressing the whole student, and (c) nurturing motivation and connections among student and faculty.

INTRODUCTION

A recent analysis of federal data reveals that more college students are enrolling in at least one fully online course each year (Smalley, 2021). If course design lacks intentionality, online education may feel dehumanizing and disconnected from students' real experiences (Shelton et al., 2020). It is essential for faculty members to be trained to create vibrant online learning environments that promote and support student-centered approaches, resulting in high engagement, motivation, and interaction (Richmond et al., 2018). In online learning, this initiative begins as soon as students start interacting with the course syllabus.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the renewed focus on systemic racism in America's historical and contemporary contexts, faculty have recently been encouraged to include more explicit statements regarding engagement, inclusivity, and civility in their syllabi. Nonetheless, the traditional syllabus continues to function as a lengthy and static contract between educators and students. Historically, course syllabi have been designed to communicate expectations regarding assignments, tasks, and institutional policies. A typical syllabus includes the course description, goals and objectives, schedule or calendar, and various course and university-mandated policies. Consequently, Pancasky-Brock et al. (2020) assert that "the syllabus can feel more like a list of do's and don'ts, which can increase a learner's anxiety and self-doubt" (p. 6). Rather, we propose that the syllabus—when reimagined—can serve as an effective instrument for culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) and sustaining (Paris, 2012) pedagogy in online education.

We, the authors, are a diverse group of higher education faculty who, like many others, aim to challenge and transform racial, gender, and ableist norms, systems, and practices affecting the educational achievements and progress of marginalized groups. Together, we undertook collaborative research (Kennedy & Dana, 2022) to examine the course syllabus through a culturally responsive and sustaining perspective, driven by a shared question: *How do education faculty perceive the transition from a traditional syllabus to a liquid syllabus in their online classes?* In this chapter, we address this question by first outlining the elements of the liquid syllabus template that we developed and applied in various online graduate and

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