As faculty at Brigham Young University–Idaho, we had the opportunity in April 2011 to attend a workshop on syllabus design with Ken Bain, author of What the Best College Teachers Do (Bain, 2004). The workshop focused on what Bain calls “the promising syllabus”. The promising syllabus is designed to be an invitation to students to engage in a conversation about what they will be doing over the course of a semester and about the nature and process of learning. Rather than having a legal document that deadens student interest and overwhelms them with regulation as their first contact with the course, Bain argues that the syllabus should invite students to be active participants in an issue of importance to them. The last part of that sentence—that the material needs to be important to them—is the key to the promising syllabus.

The Parts of the Promising Syllabus

The first step in the promising syllabus comes before our students see the syllabus at all. The first thing a professor needs to do is create an environment where the students’ mental model does not work. Bain refers to this as an “expectation failure”. And then, more importantly, the professor has to get the student to care that their mental model does not work. This is typically done through presenting a core issue in a way that connects the students’ questions about the material with the instructor’s goals for the class.

How do we do this? Typically, this happens with a story that poses a question with which students have to grapple. For example, when teaching a class in Ancient Political Theory, I can start out with the following example: “A recent poll found that two-thirds of Americans think we should reduce the amount of the Federal budget devoted to foreign aid. When the same group of people was asked what the appropriate percentage of the budget to devote to foreign aid should be, the average amount was twelve times what is currently expended.” Once students stop laughing, I then pose the simple question, “With that level of understanding being demonstrated by citizens, why do we think that the average person should have any say in government?”

Telling a group of red-blooded, red-voting college students that democracy is a really bad way to run a government creates an environment in which their mental

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models (e.g., democracy = good) are challenged in a systematic way. That question—why should the average citizen be involved in politics—then becomes the question around which the rest of the semester is built. As students discuss different reasons supporting democratic forms of government, they begin to do political theory before they know political theory. It also forces them to bump up against their own ignorance. The question that is presented in the initial story then becomes part of the promising syllabus. The syllabus becomes an invitation to students to continue that dialog over the course of the semester. More than just a list of outcomes and textbooks, the syllabus then describes what the student will know, do, or be at the end of the course if they participate in this endeavor with the instructor.

The promise or invitation is just the first part of the promising syllabus. The second key part is to describe what students will be doing in the course to achieve the vision of the deep learner that we have set before them. Bain counsels that we avoid the language of requirements, which I found difficult to do. He suggests that rather than tests, we call them “opportunities to demonstrate learning”. The grading policy—what Bain calls “the beginning of a conversation about how you and I will come to understand the nature and progress of your learning” is the final piece of a promising syllabus. This is the part that Bain says doesn’t have a right answer. The decision will be up to individual faculty members, but the key point is to have a conversation about what grading means with the students.

How the Promising Syllabus changed my teaching

While I had already started my classes with a story and question, this workshop made me rethink how I was using
that question. Previously, I had done it to give students a way to experience the way that I run a classroom and my teaching persona. Additionally, it allowed for substance to be covered in a way that would not meaningfully disadvantage students who registered late for classes. Now it serves as a focus point for the entire semester. Students were able to connect with the core of the class from day one, which allowed them a new way to access difficult material.

Additionally, it provided a guide for me in choosing how I would present material in classes. It made me be more focused as a teacher, and that added beneficial outcomes for student learning as well. Humans are story telling creatures, which makes telling stories a natural way to learn. Having students view the discipline as the natural unfolding of a story is a natural way for students to learn. I highly recommend Harvard professor Michael Sandel’s course, What is Justice?, which is available to watch at www.justiceharvard.org for further examples of teaching through storytelling.

Of course, I made direct changes to my syllabus. In addition to changes that I discussed previously, I took much of the legalese components of my syllabus (e.g., late policies, attendance, laptops, etc.) and moved them into footnotes. It’s been my experience that students don’t really read them anyway; you just need to be able to point to them in case of a complaint. For examples of additional promising syllabi, you can go to www.bestteachersinstitute.org and see actual used syllabi from a variety of disciplines.

I found the most important thing that I could do was explicitly give students permission to fail. Many strategic learners are interested in the health of their GPA for important reasons. Needing to keep the GPA high can frequently lead to students playing it safe and not taking intellectual risks that are necessary for innovative and interesting work. All of my syllabi now contain a section that reads very similar to the following:

If, at the end of the semester you are on the boundary between two grades, I reserve the right to bump you to a higher grade if you have been awesome throughout the semester. What do I mean by awesome?

I love baseball. One of the biggest thrills in baseball is hearing the crack of the bat as a hitter swings with all his might and connects right on the sweet spot and you watch that ball soar for the fences. I want you all demonstrating your homerun swings in here. We’re not aiming for intentional walks, or safe little pop flies to shallow right. I want your best Babe Ruth impersonations—point to the fences and swing with your might. It doesn’t matter to me if you fail spectacularly. I’d rather you strike out swinging then take a base on balls. Be bold. Be creative. Be awesome. And it will be good.

It is important for students—especially students who have come of age in an educational system that stresses objective test performance—to know that learning is a creative, messy, involved and complicated process. Giving students express permission to spectacularly fail created an environment in my classes where students were more comfortable with taking bold risks in the projects in a way I hadn’t seen before.

Changes that I saw in my students

Bain’s promise to those who use the promising syllabus is that it will help students become deep learners. How would I know if that had happened? What outcomes would I use to measure this progress? An easy option would be to

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measure changes in grades. However, with the promising syllabus, the way semester grades were calculated changed, and so I think there is enough measurement bias to not allow for a meaningful comparison. Average grades were slightly higher the semester I changed to the promising syllabus, but not to a statistically significant degree.

Student engagement is another potential metric. While the increase in non-graded assignments did allow some students to safely disengage, it also seemed to free up students to participate in deeper ways. I saw an increase in theoretical analysis and student ability to adapt learned material to new situations. I had a colleague pop his head into my office to tell me he had just walked past an open classroom and had seen a group of my students huddled over their laptops comparing statistical analysis reports (remember, I teach social science, so most of my majors chose their major at least in part because they don’t like math). I had promised them at the beginning of the statistics unit that they would eventually find stats really cool. He told me that they were all excited because of the high adjusted r2 they had obtained in their original research. Another student, after I explained the logic behind linear regression, said, “I knew when they taught me algebra in junior high, that there was something important about it, but I could never figure out what. Now I know why it’s so important. This is cool!” Students actually become excited about the discipline, which increases their own sense of commitment to it.

Finally, overall student performance increased. Some students you know will do high quality work, regardless of the situation you put them in. Those students did not change under the promising syllabus. Where I saw remarkable improvement was from your average, back row, goofy student. One of the aspects of the promising syllabus that I was most doubtful about was that it would take the strategic

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learners, especially those who just want a C and to get out of there, and work some sort of mystical change in them.

I allow students the freedom to choose to form their own groups or to work alone on the final project. One particular set of students especially worried me as I saw them form their group. All of them were middling students with middling commitment to the class. As a group, they were extraordinary though. They worked together with a level of commitment and excitement that I haven’t frequently seen in students. Giving them the opportunity to be deep learners, with the expectation from me that they were all capable of being deep learners, seemed to make a difference. In all of my classes, students that previously had been middle-of-the-pack students produced final projects that were qualitatively equivalent to work done by your typical A students.

Conclusion

A final caveat about using the promising syllabus is in order here. Breaking the mental models of students is emotionally tricky work, both for the instructor and the students. It is important that the syllabus shows the students how their mental models will be reconstructed, but moreover, it is imperative that professors cultivate a teaching persona that allows for students to have emotional reactions to the material as well. When learners realize their own ignorance, this can evoke a range of emotions from them; I’ve had students get angry in class, tell me how much they hate the assignments, or just completely shut down and refuse to engage. I did more emotional work with students in this semester than I had previously, from just talking to them after class, to following up on facial expressions or sending emails to those who seemed to be struggling in some manner.

Henry B. Eyring quoted C. Rolland Christensen, one of his professors, as saying:

I believe in the unlimited potential of every student. At first glance they range, like instructors, from mediocre to magnificent. But potential is invisible to the superficial gaze. It takes faith to discern it, but I have witnessed too many academic miracles to doubt its existence. I now view each student as ‘material for a work of art.’ If I have faith, deep faith, in students’ capacities for creativity and growth, how very much we can accomplish together. If, on the other hand, I fail to believe in that potential, my failure sows seeds of doubt. Students read our negative signals, however carefully cloaked, and retreat from creative risk to the ‘just possible.’ When this happens, everyone loses (Eyring, 1991).

The promising syllabus is designed to elicit that faith from the professors, and make it explicit to students. By creating an atmosphere of faith, it enhances the learning that can take place for both teacher and student.

References