

SYLLABUS AS ARTISTIC MATERIAL: AN INCOMPLETE AND SUBJECTIVE  
COLLECTION OF PERMISSIONS AND METAPHORS FOR TEACHER POSTURE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

The syllabus—one of the most ubiquitous materials of schooling—is commonly overlooked and considered to be innocuous because of its mundane nature. However, the syllabus ought to be treated with more careful consideration because it is something that teachers make (something they need to be accountable for) and actively shapes the postures that teachers and students take (something they should be aware of). Seeing the syllabus this way adheres to a view that the syllabus, as a genre, is an active agent in shaping the world and those who use it, leading to questions like: As a material, what does the syllabus do or what do teachers do through the syllabus? Where did the syllabus genre come from? What are the theories, coherence, or logic that are embedded in this material? What forces shaped it into the concretized form currently seen in education? How does the syllabus shape the educational experience for students? How does the syllabus act on teachers? Who does it benefit or hurt?

Part of this dissertation stems from the author's desire to be a more self-reflective and responsible educator and navigate the complex and tensional landscape of education. The author is not trying to destroy the syllabus or replace it with something new—but is simply asking how this seemingly impossible and rigid material, that often serves to promote one linear way of thinking about education, can be made pliable to allow for other teaching postures to be taken and to encourage other ubiquitous in education to become pliable materials as well. Through a series of gestures informed by permissions taken from artists and arts-based research methodologies, the author offers an expanded vocabulary, permissions, and metaphors for thinking of the syllabus and teaching. While the syllabus historically has been described as a contract, a permanent record, or teaching tool, the author proposes that the syllabus can—in fact—be a living curriculum, a proxy to reveal or unearth complacencies about the curriculum

(what is worth knowing) and reestablish possibly lost beliefs about pedagogy (the relationality of education), and a catalyst for imagining "schooling" as a dynamic and complex set of relationships (at its core).

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I first want to acknowledge and thank my wife, Alexis, and our kids (Scarlet, Alma, and Leo) for all of their love, encouragement, and understanding they have shown me through this long and laborious journey. They have put up with me working long hours at times, listened to my ideas, and encouraged me when I didn't know if I could do this. My larger family has also been a huge support and graciously put up with me talking about the syllabus all the time. My sister (Jenny) spent hours doing copy editing and my brother (Zac), who was also working on his Ph.D. dissertation, would routinely call to check in on me and we would give each other feedback. My committee members (Lindsay, Sarah, Joseph, and Jorge) have not only generously given their time to read and discuss my dissertation with me, but they have given me, via their scholarship, essential vocabulary and permissions that helped me see the syllabus as a pliable material. My advisor, Jorge, has spent hours teaching and mentoring me through many conversations in his studio or while taking me to lunch. His contributions have been invaluable and can be seen in this dissertation, but also who I have become as a teacher and artist. Lastly, I

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## Chapter 1: A Beginning

As we sat around the six tables smashed together like a conference table, listening to Jorge Lucero and Christopher Jones, the co-teachers of the graduate class I was taking, explain details about the course and outline what the main assignment for the semester would be, it felt very much like a typical graduate level course. They explained that the syllabus—the document teachers make at the beginning of each new semester—is one of the tasks that every professor must do as part of their functioning in the academy. As a course on teaching arts at the college level, it seemed like a fitting project for us to practice making our own syllabi. At one point during this process, Jorge said, “Each of you will make a syllabus, *whatever you interpret that to be,*” accompanied by a mischievous twinkle in his eyes that dared us to take him up on the permission he just granted to purposefully play with or misinterpret what a syllabus could be. That was the moment that everyone's attention snapped up, and we realized something just happened that was not typical. Immediately I had questions running through my mind: What did he mean? Can a syllabus be something besides a syllabus? What even is a syllabus? I was not alone. My classmates began asking similar clarifying questions about what he meant, what he was looking for, and what he expected. In return, Jorge coyly said it was up to us to decide how we would respond to his prompt. Essentially, he gave us permission to think beyond the typical understanding of what a syllabus is and to think of it more like an artistic material, something that can be made pliable.

I didn't know it then, but this moment in that white brick classroom, sitting around those tables, would become a catalyst that set off a chain of events, or a detonation of sorts, that would

change forever the way I looked at the syllabus and teaching in general, and would become the genesis of this dissertation.

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Early on in my doctoral studies, I was feeling overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy and stress as I tried to balance being a full-time Ph.D. student with being a good parent and husband. My wife, two kids, and I had just moved from Utah to Illinois, where we didn't know anyone, it was the middle of the Covid 19 pandemic, and the transition to online schooling was not easy. When I looked at my amazing classmates, I felt underqualified and like I didn't fit the model for what I thought a "good" Ph.D. student should look like. It was easy to feel like an imposter. I was particularly stressed about picking a dissertation topic and felt like everyone else knew what they were doing, and that I should too.

During this time, I met with Jorge Lucero<sup>1</sup>, my dissertation advisor, and expressed some of the stress I was feeling. He encouraged me to spend the first year or two of my Ph.D. program getting lost. Not lost in the sense of being alone or having no direction, but in the sense of allowing myself to wander metaphorically through various classes and interests, especially when it came to selecting a topic for my dissertation. I took to heart what Jorge said and took a posture that I think could be described as "ambling."

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<sup>1</sup> You will notice that Jorge Lucero will show up frequently throughout this dissertation, which feels important to acknowledge because, as my mentor some might wonder if this work is my own or some extension of his. The presence of Jorge's scholarship in my dissertation is not accidental, nor was I compelled to use it, but it is solely here because it provides key vocabulary, permissions, or postures for the research I am doing with the syllabus. In fact, it was the work Jorge was doing that attracted me to study at the University of Illinois in the first place. I recognized in Jorge's practices shared beliefs about teaching and art making and I wanted to study with him. Jorge's scholarship and mentorship have been key to the work I am doing in this dissertation and its presence here reflects our relationship and the way we have come alongside each other to ask questions about the nature of schooling as a material, teaching, and art making.



The word *amble* means to move or walk at a slow, relaxed, or leisurely pace, to wander. this suggests a posture of ease, but also one of flexibility or curiosity, to allow oneself to take in the sites along the way. In an ambling posture, a person might rest when needed, take a closer look at something that draws their attention, or stop to talk to someone they meet on the way. Ambling allows for emergent stimuli to dictate what an experience is like.

In an ambling manner, I took classes that sounded interesting, like an architecture course about iconoclasm and the built environment, which primarily responded to social protests regarding monuments at the time, and an introduction course to using maker spaces. I chose topics for research papers that intrigued me (the pedagogical turn in contemporary art or the artistic and pedagogic qualities of archives). Each of these turns, stops, or jaunts were valuable and moved me along my journey, but none of them felt right or compelled me to make it the sole topic of my dissertation. I think I was looking for an “aha” moment or an epiphany where some concept or thing would make itself known as being the topic for my dissertation. While you might be thinking this is too idealistic, and maybe it was, it actually happened to me, and it happened in the least likely of places, the syllabus.

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This brings us back to that moment when I was assigned to make a syllabus. The pedagogic gesture Jorge made, inviting his students to play with a material to get to know it better, is one that I am familiar with. When I was teaching middle school art, I often gave new material to my art students and invited them to play with the material to see what it could or couldn't do before I gave any formal instruction. They would play with it and test the materiality of the medium in ways I had never considered, and as a result, they could then tell me about the

material's qualities. We would then talk about what that material might be good for and what it might not be good for.

I later learned that Jorge had done a variety of exercises in other courses regarding the syllabus. In a previous version of the course I took, he and his students discussed what a syllabus is before they were expected to make one. They made lists about what the syllabus is, what goes in it, and how it is used. While more formal in nature, Jorge would interject permissions to think more broadly about the syllabus. This approach was something I also was familiar with as an art teacher. I often introduced material to my students by first explaining its qualities, and what it might be good for, providing demonstrations, techniques, and conventions for using it. I opted for this method particularly when the material posed any potential danger to students. The premise of both pedagogical approaches is the same: It is important for the creative practitioner to increasingly understand their material and what it does, which can be aided by knowing where it is rigid and where it is pliable. If, as teachers, we think of ourselves as artists or creative practitioners, who work through and rely on intimately understanding their mediums or materials, then the syllabus, as one of the educational materials that teachers make and routinely use, should also be known intimately.

This testing of a material as a way to know it is one of the basic methods an artist uses when working with a material. Jorge once described this method of testing of materiality this way:

The process is not unlike that which studio artists—and other similar creative practitioners—take to increasingly understand the pliability of their chosen material or medium. A ceramicist “plays” with the clay, getting to know it—both in its potential and

deficiencies—by stretching the material to its limits, as well as trying actions with it that seem counter-intuitive. There are many moments of failure, of getting to the edges of understanding, and of heading back to the “drawing board,” but in the end the artist comes away with—not only a clearer understanding of their material’s potential—but maybe even some wholly new positionings about what their material’s place and function in the world might be. Their material gets reinvented, so to speak, not because it changes properties, but because it is rethought (J. Lucero, personal communication, November 4, 2023).

The artist might test the materiality of something by employing actions like bending, folding, or tearing, which are three of the 108 actions that the American sculptor, Richard Serra, proposes in his art piece, *Verb List* (1967), to see what a material can or cannot do. What the material affords or limits through its materiality dictates what is possible and how the artist might use it. It can be important for the artist to suspend their taste and prior knowledge of a material and its traditional uses to let the material exist in a more “present-at-hand” state, which the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1927/1962) described as when a material is seen free from its function, allowing it to be present, not a tool or mechanism to carry out some goal. As Jorge points out, the result of playing with the material, even at moments of failure, results in a greater understanding of that material and how it might be used by the artist.

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Now, like most anyone who has been involved in the American education system, especially higher education, the syllabus was not new to me; I was particularly familiar with the way that many people think of the syllabus as a contract (see Snyder, 2009; Parkes and Harris, 2002; Fink, 2012). When I was a middle school art teacher, my administrators would often

remind my colleagues and me that our disclosure documents—the K–12 version of syllabi—were like contracts that would protect against disagreements with disgruntled parents or students. While I can see the wisdom and benefits to teachers, students, parents, and administrators in making policies known in writing, I was bothered by how it makes teaching feel like a legal agreement or business exchange. In the article “Syllabus” (2019), James Seitz, a professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of Virginia, shares a similar perspective and expressed concern that we consider the syllabus a “legal contract rather than an implied statement of pedagogical philosophy” (p. 458). Seitz goes further and presents an alternative,

We should consider the benefits of the syllabus that omits grand claims about skills students “will” acquire and seeks instead to speak frankly about what a course aspires to, even if there’s no knowing how it will turn out. Since every syllabus reflects, however unwittingly, a philosophy of education, I want to endorse syllabi that imagine education not as a system of inputs and outcomes but as a dialogic encounter that, like all dialogue, entails results that are ultimately all the more valuable for their uncertainty (p. 459).

Seitz eloquently explains some of my discomfort with seeing the syllabus as a contract. The contract metaphor suggests a stance or posture of teaching that does not align with the kind of relationship I want to have with my students. When I was given the assignment to make a syllabus, I began to play with the possibility of how the concept of the syllabus as a contract could be made more pliable and could be made to align with my approach to teaching.

At the time, I had been viewing education through a cripestimological lens which was informed by Robert McRuer’s (2006) “Crip theory,” one of the theoretical frameworks that my class was using to examine teaching at the college level. Crip theory examines the intersection of disability studies with other critical theories regarding race, class, and gender to challenge the

normative/hierarchical structures that rely on ableism and the essentializing of difference (McRuer, 2006). Thinking about teaching through a cripestimological lens was one of the avenues in which my professors hoped to challenge us, their students, to think more deeply about issues of access, embodiment, and representation within education (Jones & Lucero, 2021). Kevin Gotkin (2012), one of the artists we discussed in class, summarized what I was feeling when they said in their video art piece, “The paradox about experience is that it is something completely our own and yet something we must share with others” (02:44). Each person’s experience as a human being is uniquely their own. It is shaped by their abilities, culture, and situation, yet we are not alone, we share this experience with everyone else. As someone considering what it means to be a teacher, I found myself asking questions about the nature of teaching and the difficulty of constructing an educative experience in a communal classroom setting that allows for each student’s unique abilities, expertise, desires, learning styles, etc. In addition to the difficulty of addressing each student’s diverse needs, abilities, or interests, a teacher must navigate their own beliefs, administrative agendas, institutional goals, and societal pressures, which make teaching a seemingly impossible task full of complex tensions. In this regard, maybe education can be aptly described as a “tensional landscape,” which phenomenologist, Gary Backhaus (2003) argues are spaces like biospheres, which rely on a web of relations to maintain balance and order, while also being complex, dynamic, and enduring.

As I thought about the complexity and tension of teaching, the idea of the syllabus as a contract weighed on my mind. A contract implies that there is a binding or constricting agreement being made between a teacher and students. Is the contract between each individual student and the teacher, or is it a group contract between all the students as one entity and the teacher? This ambiguity creates an inherent tension between individual needs and group needs.

Often, we make decisions using a democratic manner that favors the majority, but what about the minority? What happens to their learning experience if we always make decisions that fit the majority of students? I began to wonder if there was a way that each student could have more power to shape their learning experience for their own situation, while still maintaining a shared learning experience that is central to schooling. The question then was how far this idea of an individual contract could be pushed and still maintain a level of commonality.

With Jorge's permission and invitation to interpret the idea of the syllabus liberally lingering in my mind, I began to test the pliability of this material by focusing on this common view that a syllabus is a contract that binds people together. I came up with an idea for a syllabus that is flexible yet still bounds teachers and students together by using *bounds* instead of *binds*. While *binds* suggests a constricting to a singular experience, *bounds* suggests a more expansive action, like marking the furthest edge of a space. At the end of the semester, I presented/performed *Syllabus: A Thing that Bounds* for the "BO\*\* \*\*ND Syllabus Symposium," a symposium my classmates and I organized to share the syllabi that each of us made over the semester. The syllabus I presented was a collection of thoughts on the intersection of the syllabus and Crip theory (see Appendix A). As I talked about some of the paradoxes I see in education, I had a classmate bind me with a rope to a chair to demonstrate how the syllabus is often metaphorically thought of as a contract or a thing that binds or holds us tight to some ideal or attempts to control an outcome. While my classmate unraveled the bindings, I discussed the idea of the syllabus being a reciprocal and horizontal relationship between students and a teacher; one where each person brings their own abilities, experiences, and desires into the classroom, yet still has a communal-shared experience. In the end, I invited those in attendance to hold onto the rope. The rope was flexible and allowed individuals to sit, stand, and pull in different directions,

yet still maintain a connection. The rope was my new metaphor for the syllabus—a thing that bounds us together in a communal experience while simultaneously making room for individual adaptation.

\* It is important to note here that I am not against the idea of the syllabus being something that binds or holds tightly to some ideal or agreement. I will even advocate for when and why I think this could be a valuable thing later on in my dissertation.

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If you had asked me a year ago if the syllabus was interesting or worth paying attention to, I would have laughed and said, “No way.” This view was partly from my experience of being bored out of my mind on the first day of class when my teachers read their syllabus outlining the schedule, assignments, and grading. At first, the impetus for looking at the syllabus was a practical one. I had to make a syllabus for my class, so I thought I had better figure out what a syllabus is so I could make one. Somewhere in this process, something changed in the way I looked at the syllabus. The syllabus—that ubiquitous and seemingly mundane document used in education that I had never contemplated much—became a generative material to examine complacencies about the curriculum (what is worth knowing) and reestablish possibly lost beliefs about pedagogy (the relationality of education). It went from being something that I overlooked to something so compelling that I chose to write a dissertation about it.

While I described this moment of looking at the syllabus—a mundane material of schooling—in a new way, as being surprising, it really should not be. Over the course of my teaching in middle schools, I had already begun to consider the materiality of schooling through an artist manner but did not yet have the words to articulate it. For example, in the last school I taught at, my principal asked for volunteers to supervise students during lunch. No one wanted to

give up their lunch hour, but I was sold when I was told I would get free school lunch. Early on in this experience, I began documenting what I ate for lunch. As I took photos each day for the remainder of the school year, I began to think of this act not as an undesired part of my job, but as a performance piece in which I occupied a curious cultural space and shared the same food my students were eating (see Figure 1). Another example can be seen in my *Trash Compositions Series* (see Figure 2). This series originated from me sweeping up the inevitable scraps and detritus left on the floor after teaching my middle school art students about collage. I didn't want to leave a mess for the custodians, so I began sweeping the garbage up at the end of each day. While initially, this process was mundane and laborious, I began to see amazing compositions made by the scraps on the floor and began to document them. From then on, I was excited to sweep up, wondering what new composition I would find. In both cases, I was paying attention to the space I was in and using my artistic practice as a way to engage with the material at hand, which resulted in me seeing that material or moment in a more significant way.

**Figure 1**

*School Lunch*





**Figure 2**

*Trash Compositions #1 & #2*



In hindsight, I shouldn't have been surprised that Jorge's invitation to look at the syllabus differently became a detonation of sorts; it turns out I had already been using this approach as a teacher and artist. However, as I began to utilize the permission to create a pliable syllabus and look at the syllabus in a new light, maybe more like an artist who plays with a material to see how it bends, folds, or resists, I found myself seeing the syllabus not as a boring or insignificant material, but something that was meaningful and held importance for me as a teacher trying to understand my practice. I said earlier that I thought the syllabus was the least likely of places for me to find this "aha" moment, but to use the Irish surfer/cinematographer, Mickey Smith's words, it was the place I found "my heart beats hardest" (Smith, 2010, 02:22). I have wondered if part of the reason Jorge had that mischievous or knowing look when he gave the assignment was because he knew that maybe one of his students would be blown away by what they could learn from looking at the syllabus like an artistic material. Jorge described this sort of "living curriculum" (Lucero, 2021a, p. 4), as something that happens over a longer duration of time. While citing Greg Ulmer's (1986) work, Lucero (2021a) writes:

Such projects are assignments given to the future...to imagine a post-meaning...the temporality of teaching...In the classroom it is never a question, really, of what I mean...*meaning not as denotation but as detonation*, time bomb [italics in original] (P. 5)

Like many things of explosive nature, which only become explosive in the correct environmental settings or when they come in contact with the right material, it took me years of studying and exploring my interests in education to experience my detonation. That moment happened because I found a material that is central to education, a material that reveals so much about our ideas about curriculum (what is worth knowing) and pedagogy (the relational aspect of teaching). I was given permission to lean into my artistic modes of knowing, enabling me to see the syllabus beyond my previous experience or the traditional view that is common within education. By looking at the syllabus as an artistic material, I began to realize that while the syllabus may typically be overlooked and seen as merely a contract, a permanent record, a teaching tool, a course of study, or a schedule, the syllabus can, in fact, be a material that reveals hidden or forgotten insights about what it means to be a teacher; it is both a material that we as teachers make (thus we need to be accountable for what it does) and something that makes us as teachers (it has the power to shape our postures as teachers). It is with these thoughts in mind that I pick up the syllabus and, once again, building on this initial experience, ask: What is this material? What does it do? Might there be areas where it can be made pliable, making it possible to rethink this material in a way that allows for new or reconceptualized postures to be taken as a teacher?

### **The Problem**

The syllabus is not new, in fact, I would imagine that almost anyone who has gone through the American school system could describe a syllabus to you. If you asked if I knew what a syllabus was, I would have answered, “Yes, of course.” What would come to mind was a

document with a white background, black text, and mostly without imagery. I would then think about the distinctive organization outlined in the syllabus including course information, a description or overview of the course, assignments, schedules, readings, grading policies, etc.

Beyond the formal qualities, the syllabus also has certain conventions as to its functions or purposes that it is thought to fulfill. Its primary function seems to be a communication device that can fulfill a variety of needs like describing what a course is about, what knowledge will be studied, roles and responsibilities of students and teachers, and any pertinent policies (Fink, 2012; Thompson, 2007; Parkes & Harris, 2002). For these reasons, the syllabus is often described as a contract, a permanent record, a teaching tool, or a course of study (Snyder, 2009; Parkes and Harris, 2002; Fink, 2012). For me, the recognition of the unmistakable and distinctive form of the syllabus and its uses comes from my experience in my twenty-five-plus years of being a student and a teacher.

It would not be amiss to describe the syllabus in this sense as being “concretized,” which Jorge Lucero (2013) describes as when a form or practice develops a strong definition in working practices, language, form and, “maybe most problematic—a clean-enough” story (p. 173). I’m not alone in seeing the syllabus in a singular view that was “concretized.” In the inaugural edition of the *Syllabus Journal*, a journal dedicated to studying the syllabus as a standalone genre of teacher scholarship, Alexander Sidorkin (2012), the editor, asks the question, “How do you know you are seeing a syllabus?” He then states it’s obvious, the “outward signs are unmistakable” (Sidorkin, 2012, p. 30)—it details things like the title, professor's name, credit hours, descriptions and rationales describing objectives/outcomes, reading list, assignments, calendar, grading policies, and policies regarding diversity and inclusion that signify this document you may be looking at is a syllabus. Even with variations in syllabi, it is through these

essential components that syllabi are recognized. But it isn't just the form or content of the syllabus that is concretized, we also have a set of inherited views, behaviors, and cultures regarding how we interact with the syllabus.

The syllabus, like schools in general, is being compelled toward a model that uses structured, deliberate, systematic, and predictable materials, tools, and practices to produce tangible results that can be measured on tests and validated through things like degrees, awards, and credits (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; Smith, 1999, 2008; Eraut, 2000; Dewey, 1916/2009). These methods are not “bad things” in and of themselves, all education, whether experimental or traditional, utilizes systems aligned to a certain set of values or ideals to facilitate desired outcomes. Nadine Kalin, a professor of art education, claims in an article for the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* (2012) that the concretization of education, and in this case, the syllabus, is part of a larger turn in education to produce tangible results according to authoritarian models of learning that focus on economic logics and little else. Again, the focus on economic or capitalist purposes within education is not all bad, but it becomes problematic when other concerns or purposes are pushed aside. In other words, education might be described as a landscape where one organism or tension has gained more power over others, throwing the equilibrium that is needed in a biosphere out of balance, which Backhuas (2003) argues is central to the longevity of natural systems. It is not just in education that the syllabus has increasingly become a contested subject; many parents, lawmakers, and political groups have used the syllabus as a way to control what is taught in schools (See Lyons, 2019; Graziano, et. al, 2019; Nossel, 2022). Even the rhetoric in a syllabus that is littered with words like “must” and “will,” reveals the way the syllabus is thought to be a tool to shape and control what is taught and learned. In this way, the syllabus is not just a document, but is an active force or tool that shapes

posture and invites certain behaviors. The action or mechanism works by metaphors which model ideas about how the world works.

For example, as was mentioned earlier, it is very common to hear people call the syllabus a contract. This metaphor suggests that the syllabus ought to be considered a legally binding document (Seitz, 2019; Nilson, 2010). For teachers like William Germano & Kit Nicholls (2020), this metaphor that claims a syllabus is a contract, transforms the classroom into a space that is dominated by ideals in line with lawyers, corporations, and institutional policy making instead of a collaborative space of learning. Do we want the relationship between a student and teacher to be seen as purely transactional, which also implies knowledge and learning are something that can be packaged, controlled, and transferred to students in some guaranteed way? This model of education is the model that Paulo Freire (1970/2000), the Brazilian educator and philosopher, rejected and called the “Banking Method” (p.72). In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes the Banking Method of education as an “act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 72). This style of education stems from a particular view of philosophy and learning, that we are born tabula rasa, an empty slate (Hein, 1999). Within this method, students are described as “containers” or “receptacles” (Freire, 1970/2000, p.72), clearly delineating the student as a powerless object that the teacher controls. Freire thus argued, “Students cannot become truly human” (p.72), because they are treated as objects. Freire along with other critical education theorists like hooks (1994), Postman and Weingartner (1969), have informed my criticality of educational methods that establish hierarchies of power between students and teachers.

If we lean into this metaphor and see education as having transactional aspects, we ought to also consider the power differential this creates. Students occupy an exceptionally powerless position in this exchange; they have little or no say over the terms of the contract. Teachers and the academic institution set the terms of the contract and adopt a “take it or leave it” attitude, yet students often are required to take a certain course to get a degree. One of the problems Freire (1970/2000) saw in the Banking Model was the teacher's dominance over students in their relationship with each other. Freire said, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72). Friere’s “Critical Pedagogy” calls for teachers to become partners with their students, trust their students' creative powers, come alongside students, and join together to truly experience the humanization of education. Together in dialogue, students and teachers share responsibility and authority over learning. Students are “no longer docile listeners,” but “are now critical investigators in the dialogue with the teacher (Friere, 1970/2018, p. 81). This model of education suggests a different posture for both teachers and students, which again prompts a critical questioning of things like the syllabus to examine how they inform and reveal the power structures of the classroom.

In addition, there is the part of many syllabi where a teacher says this document may need to change, which points to the unpredictable and emergent quality that is essential to learning. The curricular scholar, Ted Aoki (1986/2004) wrote about the unpredictable and emergent quality of education as an “indwelling between two curriculum worlds:” curriculum-as-lived and the curriculum-as-planned (p. 159). According to Aoki, indwelling is a mode of being that is defined by “tensionality,” or a condition that emerges from being between two worlds where each side has its own values, interests, and assumptions that assert a force on the

individual. This may connote a negative thing—a string can only sustain so much tension before snapping—but as Aoki reminds, “to be alive is to live in tension” (p. 162) and it is through tension that cords in instruments or in our throat are able to make beautiful songs. What Aoki is describing are two differing paradigms or views on how education should be done, and each is imbued with its own set of values, interests, and assumptions regarding education. For instance, the curriculum-as-planned world is associated more with the “official” or “standard” curriculum or the larger societal goals for education that have been made by outside entities like curriculum planners, state lawmakers, and other stakeholders like school administrators, school boards, etc., but doesn’t leave room for the personal goals. The curriculum-as-lived, however, embraces education as something that emerges out of the daily interactions with people who have a variety of needs, abilities, and interests and rejects the “fiction of sameness” which “disavows the living presence of people” (Aoki, 1986/2004, p. 161). For Aoki, good teachers need to recognize that ignoring either side of these two opposing forces would result in poor education; they each have a claim on the teacher. So, if a syllabus is thought of as a contract, it is a bad contract if a teacher can change it at will without the consent of the students, who essentially agreed to certain terms when they agreed to take the class. But if teaching is seen as indwelling between the curriculum-as-planned and the curriculum-as-lived, then seeing the syllabus as a living document that must change to reflect the tensionality inherent to education may be a more fitting metaphor.

### ***Syllabus as Genre***

I use the syllabus-as-contract metaphor to point out the way the syllabus can be seen as being a genre or, as the genre studies scholar Anis Bawarshi (2003) claims, the “master genre of the classroom” (p. 119). The term “genre” may be understood as a way to distinguish one type of thing from another, which suggests that the primary function of a genre is to categorize.

However, more recently, I discovered that within genre studies, there is a group of scholars that argue genres are not merely tools for categorization but are models or tools that actively shape how people think, act, and feel about various situations they encounter (Dryer, 2007; Bazerman, 1997, 2010). In essence, genres are systems that people use to approach similar situations and invite a predetermined behavior or appropriate response to that moment (Dryer, 2007). Genres establish rules of engagement, behaviors, mindsets, postures, or ways of being by establishing logic or common sense based on particular situations (Bazerman, 1997). For instance, when we go to the library, the shelves are commonly sorted into various genres: non-fiction, fiction, juvenile, adult, fantasy, crime, drama, graphic novels, and so on. Those categories can be helpful in giving us a sense of what we will get if we read a book from a certain shelf, however, they can also predetermine how we read that book. We likely approach a fictional story about a fantasy world differently than a historical non-fiction account of an event. In other words, genres invite certain postures, which I define simply as how someone holds themselves in relation to something, a person, or a moment. Jorge Lucero (2011) talks about posture as a “way of being” (p. 88) in the world or the way a person holds themselves physically or metaphorically in relation to something else (teaching, others, the world, God, etc.). Charles Bazerman (1997) in *The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom*, articulates this well:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guide-posts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (p. 19)



The syllabus, understood through genre, may play a crucial role in the shaping of the postures that teachers take. Bawarshi (2003) makes such an argument when he says the “syllabus plays a major role in establishing the ideological and discursive environment of the course, generating and enforcing the subsequent relations, subject positions, and practices teacher and students will perform during the course” (p. 119). For example, we expect that a teacher will be the sole person who will decide what is taught and how it is taught, or we expect a teacher to provide a set calendar at the beginning of the semester, suggesting that that is the best practice for teaching. Like all genres, the syllabus has “developed a set of conventions in terms of content and format” (Snyder, 2009, Para. 3), which inherently promote a logic or coherence that make some beliefs, practices, or postures in education make more sense than others. Documents like the syllabus become “world-building documents” because they structure the learning experience and promote the value systems that are embedded in them. Jonathan Harris (2009) is an artist and technologist who wrote an essay exploring the state of the digital world in which he calls the designers, architects, and engineers who are building the digital world, “world builders.” As a “world-builder,” Harris believes we need to take responsibility for the way the environments, spaces, platforms, systems, and practices we create are shaping the behaviors and experiences of others. Similarly, the syllabus is not neutral, but is an active agent in shaping how we think, act, and feel and, as such, needs to be considered more critically, especially by those who make them.

There is another related issue with the syllabus being concretized into a generic and easily recognizable form: we tend not to look at those things very closely and can easily overlook their significance. It may sound crazy for me to claim that the syllabus is overlooked within education considering the vast amount of literature and university resources dedicated to the subject of the syllabus—you can conduct an internet search that includes almost any university’s

name, followed by “how to write a syllabus,” and it will bring up resources telling you what a syllabus is and the best practices for creating and using one (see the the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign’s Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning page for an example). James Seitz (2019) had a similar experience when conducting research for his article on the syllabus, he writes “I’m not claiming it doesn’t exist, but my search led almost exclusively to rather obvious tips on how to design a syllabus instead of to scholarly interrogations of its function in various approaches to education” (p. 457). While a lot of attention is paid to the syllabus from an institutional level, there is a surprising lack of literature theorizing on a deeper level about the syllabus as one of the premier educational genres of teacher writing and as a significant pedagogical practice.

### ***Danger of Overlooking the Syllabus***

The scant amount of academic scholarship or research on the topic of the syllabus is surprising considering the level of production and place of importance the syllabus has in education. Diann Baecker (1998), a professor of English who studied the rhetoric commonly found in syllabi, concluded that, “It is curious that, as significant a genre as it is, the syllabus has received so little critical attention” (p. 61). This thought was echoed by Germano and Nicholls (2020), who, in their book on the syllabus, repeatedly note that in their experience as professors the syllabus is overlooked, as evidenced by the following statement: “If you look at much of what’s been written on the subject of education, it’s clear that not many scholars thought that the syllabus itself was worth their readers’ time, or their own” (p. 11). While there has been significant attention paid to the discussion of what should go into a syllabus, and how one is created, or used, there has been relatively little literature discussing what constitutes a syllabus and its form as a stand-alone genre of scholarship (Parkes & Harris 2002; Baecker, 1998;

Snyder, 2009). However, there is an emerging group of scholars who are doing this type of work and have called for greater attention to be given to the syllabus (Baecker 1998; Bazerman, 2010; Cardozo, 2006; Fink, 2012; Germano & Nicholls, 2020; Yalden, 1983. Luke, et al., 2013).

Despite this attention, the syllabus may still be one of the most overlooked, under-theorized, and seemingly dull aspects of education for students and teachers alike.

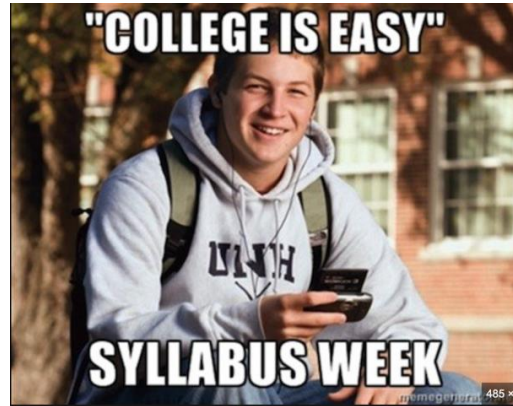
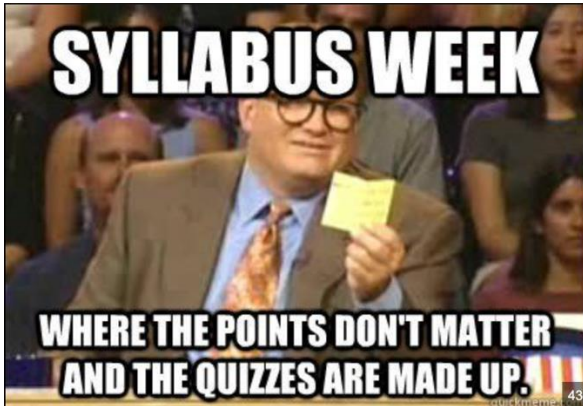
One of the strange parts of all of this is that we know the syllabus is something we overlook. One only has to search the hashtag #syllabusweek to find a slew of memes, posts, and stories of people doing all sorts of things (i.e., going to the beach, the gym, having wild parties) besides attending class, because everyone knows the teacher is just going over the syllabus and the real work of being a student starts the second day of class. I have also come across a variety of jokes, memes, or commentary about the way students do not read the syllabus (see Figure 3, as well as Sisyphus Redeemed, 2022; Howard, 2022).

**Figure 3**

*Memes About the Syllabus*



Figure 3 (contin.)



This sentiment can even be seen in scholarly settings, as evidenced by Samuel Rocha (2020), who, in his philosophical text *The Syllabus as Curriculum*, theorizes why students do not read the syllabus. He states,

I know what they say: *students never read the syllabus*. There are tons of memes and jokes about this. But I also think that teachers often do not write a syllabus to be seriously read. Syllabi are often written in a style more suited to scanning the page, so why blame the students for doing exactly that? (p. 70).

Later in the text, he again makes another observation that suggests why the syllabus is not read more seriously:

In fact, it is my present view that it is just as plausible to suppose that one reason few students really *read* the syllabus today could be because the syllabus document, as a genre, is so often written precisely not to be read, to be scanned or mined for surface information. If professors were to write their syllabi to be read in a manner that is consistent with what we expect from students in the courses the syllabi belong to, perhaps we would have better results (p. 119).

The claim that very few students read their course syllabus is common among those writing about the syllabus (see Crispi & Stivers 2015, Germano & Nicholls, 2020). It is not only students that may not pay attention to the syllabus, but teacher training programs as well. Susan Fink (2012), citing Eberly et al. (2001), claims that many teacher training programs and graduate schools do not typically teach about syllabus design, instead relying on senior teachers guiding inexperienced teachers in how to create a syllabus. Adding to this point, Baecker (1998) and Sidorkin (2012) both contend that many teachers, especially new teachers, are in the practice of inheriting and using previous syllabi in uncritical ways, resulting in teachers replicating the style of teaching that was taught to them, which as Snyder (2009), in a brief article on the history of the syllabus, believes leads to “informed guesswork rather than a simple application of experimentally derived principles” (para. 4) being used to make syllabi. This is significant because “when teachers repeat past practices because they are familiar or comfortable with them, without thinking of underlying theories or values that they reinforce, they may unwittingly be working toward a goal with which they do not agree” (McKay & Buffington, 2013 p. 10). In short, we teach as we were taught, and so we use the syllabus as we saw it being used, without much consideration for the theories behind it.

The danger here is that without a closer inspection, we may be lulled into a state of unquestioning belief that the current conception of the syllabus is good and inherent to education, without properly considering the power embedded within to shape the education experience. Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook (2002) while writing about the power of archives, which, like the syllabus, may be thought of as being an innocuous space, argue that “When power is denied, overlooked, or unchallenged, it is misleading at best and dangerous at worst. Power recognized becomes power that can be questioned, made accountable, and opened to

transparent dialogue and enriched understanding” (p. 2). Similarly, Dianne Harris (2007), in *Race, Space and the Destabilization of Practice*, cautions not to overlook mundane things like the built environment, because, as she claims, the built environment is “an active agent in the formation of ideas about race, identity, belonging, exclusion, and minoritization” (p. 2). While Schwartz, Cook, and Harris do not directly address education or the syllabus, their points have merit, and the syllabus should be considered an active agent in education.

It seems like one of the problems with the syllabus as a genre or cultural material, is that it is unclear who has ownership and responsibility for the creation of the syllabus. Administrators don’t make the syllabus, but often set expectations of what is included. Teachers may be the primary writers of the syllabus but can also feel like they do not have full autonomy over making the syllabus and are compelled to follow a set of conventions. This is problematic because the various parties that are involved (teachers, administrators, students) are, in their own ways, active and complicit in making it what it is, but without the same care or supervision they might have for something they deemed as being their sole responsibility. To use a garden analogy, if one person, or even a group of people, is seen as the stewards responsible for what is growing in a garden, then we know who to go to when the garden begins to grow wild. However, if the garden belongs to everybody, then no one feels like they can step in and prune the garden or take responsibility for it, allowing the plants to grow according to their own designs. This implies that “growing wild” is a bad thing or suggests that nature’s system is flawed, but I only mean that a garden is a human invention and, depending on the goal of the garden, growing wild may not serve the human purposes it was made for.

The way the syllabus might grow in an uncontrolled or organic way is not unlike the way that language, symbols, and actions evolve to have meaning within cultural contexts. For

example, Gilbert Ryle describes the way that one constricts their eyelid as winking and, by it, communicates intentional meaning (as cited in Geertz, 2008). One person may constrict their eyelid because it is an unconscious twitch, another may wink conspiratorially at a friend, or one could wink in a way that exaggerates and communicates a joking or mocking attitude (Geertz, 2008). For the wink to carry meaning, let's say to communicate a conspiratorial gesture between friends, a shared understanding between the one winking and the observer(s) is needed. That shared understanding often seems to come from a prolonged personal relationship between the giver and receiver or participation in the same cultural group. The symbolic meaning of the wink is determined by the collective group, meaning there is not really a singular authority who is in charge of establishing or controlling its meaning. In Richard Sennett's (2008) *The Craftsman*, a book about craftsmanship and its importance to individuals and societies, Sennett theorizes that when people only make one part of a bigger whole, like what happens in factories, those involved do not fully take responsibility for what they make because in their minds, their job is to make this one part of a thing, they are not supposed to be concerned with what the final product is used for, that is someone else's job. As a result, we can participate in the creation and perpetuation of cultural meaning without fully knowing it. Even if we wanted to take more control over it, it is difficult because it belongs to a group of people. However, the fact that the syllabus is so ubiquitous to education, might, in fact, make it more pliable as a material because, like garbage, the syllabus is deemed as being ignorable or something that no one cares to touch, meaning one might be able to play with it in any way they like, as long as they are able to endure the disapproving looks others may give them for playing with the thing that shouldn't be played with.

I have been guilty of overlooking the syllabus, largely because I thought it was something insignificant to me as a teacher or student due to its mundane, restrictive, and dry formal qualities. I overlooked the affordances this material offered to me as a teacher. Even more concerning, I failed to take responsibility for the syllabi I made and used and never fully considered the origins of the practice because it felt innocuous and didn't merit my attention. In other words, I have inherited and used a tool/practice without considering where it came from, what it is designed to do, and whom it might benefit or hurt. As someone on the cusp of becoming a professor of art education who will be teaching other teachers, I feel a sense of urgency to take up the syllabus as a subject to study as a way to discover what it can offer to me as a teacher, as well as help me become a more conscientious and responsible creator of syllabi. Through an examination of the emergence of the syllabus in education and an attempt to unpack its history, as well as the forces that have led to the current concretized and hardened form, I hope to understand this material better and find ways to make the form of the syllabus become more flexible and generous in a way that will expand, validate, and allow for new or reconceptualized teacher postures being taken to make education more diverse and liberatory in nature.

### **Research Questions/Intentions**

This brings us to the crux of my dissertation: As I began my first metaphoric dance with the syllabus, I began to sense that the syllabus had more significance and potential to offer me than I previously thought. I contend that the syllabus—one of the primary materials of education—which is commonly overlooked, thought to be innocuous or neutral, ought to be viewed as being something we make (something we need to be accountable for) and as an active agent in shaping the postures we take as teachers (something we should be aware of). The “we”



in those sentences is inclusive of those who are involved in any way in the making, teaching, or use of syllabi (teachers, administrators, accreditation committees). This view adheres to the view that the syllabus, as a genre, is an active agent in shaping the world and those who use it, leading to the sort of questions that ask: As a material, what does the syllabus do or what do teachers do through the syllabus? Where did the syllabus genre come from? What are the theories, coherence, or logic that are embedded in this material? What forces shaped it into the concretized form we are now familiar with? How does the syllabus shape the educational experience for students? How does the syllabus act on me as a teacher? Who does it benefit or hurt?

Can this seemingly impossible and rigid material, that often serves to promote one linear way of thinking about education, be made pliable to allow for other teaching postures and to encourage other ubiquitous in education to become pliable materials as well? Part of my dissertation then becomes a way to ask how we can grapple with the past's histories, traditions, and forms of education that have been handed to us, while simultaneously facing the future and allowing for growth and change to occur. I am not trying to destroy the syllabus or replace it with something new—I am simply acknowledging that the syllabus goes unnoticed, unchallenged, and under-theorized and it would be worth our while to pay more attention to it because, as a genre, it can be an active agent in the formation of the ideas and postures we take as teachers, and it is something we can also (re)shape to become what we want it to be, to make it behave in a way that reminds us of what our intentions, goals, or dreams are for education.

### *Syllabus as Metaphor*

I have been talking a lot about the way the syllabus, as a genre, functions as an active agent in meaning-making, but there is another way of describing this action: The syllabus can also be seen as a metaphor, which is traditionally understood as a figure of speech that helps

convey meaning by comparing something we are familiar with to something new or comparing things that are familiar, but don't usually go together to create new meaning. However, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), describe metaphors as going beyond a mere figure of speech to become the primary conceptual model or system that humans use to think, act, and make meaning about the world. Lakoff and Johnson, who are both cognitive linguists and philosophers, theorize human thinking is metaphorical in nature and centers around creating systems or understandings of how the world works, which we then use to inform our thoughts and actions. They state, "Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them—and, by this means, reason about them" (p.25) This seems to make sense—we first have an experience with something and then create an understanding of what it is, what it can do, where it fits in the world, and how we relate to it. We then hold that idea in our head so that the next time we come across that thing or situation, we know how to appropriately respond to it. As a result, we don't need to go through the full process of figuring out what a thing is each time we encounter it.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim,

The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual systems thus play a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor (p. 3).

Metaphors work both in conscious and unconscious ways to shape how we behave, so despite the importance of metaphors in our daily lives, we may not be fully aware of why we think or behave in certain ways. This implies that in order to be aware of why we think or behave in a certain way, we need to examine our deeply held beliefs in a self-reflexive manner. Another key point that Lakoff and Johnson point out, is the way that the metaphors we live by, both personal and cultural, are often preserved in rituals. The word “rituals” could also be substituted with words like traditions, behaviors, conventions, or forms, meaning that the traditions or conventions that we have with the syllabus might be seen as metaphors that can communicate deeply held ideas about education and teaching.

In *Education Is Translation: A Metaphor for Change in Learning and Teaching* (2006), Alison Cook-Sather, a professor of education at Bryn Mawr College, claims that the field of education is full of metaphors that present a rationale or coherent logic for why teaching or education should be thought of as X, Y, or Z. Metaphors, in this context, are used as the mechanism to dictate how a genre behaves or how a person in a specific context should behave. For example, one of the metaphors for teaching she shares is “a teacher is a sculptor” (p. 159). I selected this one as an example because it is also one that Doug Lemov (2010) uses in the introduction to his book, *Teach Like a Champion*, which was the text my first-year instructional coach often used to instruct me in “best practices” of teaching. In the introduction, Lemov begins the metaphor by stating that the book is focused on, “The art of teaching and its tools” (p. xv). He goes on to say: “Great teaching is an art. In other arts—painting, sculpture, the writing of novels—great masters leverage a proficiency with basic tools to transform the rawest of material (stone, paper, ink) into the most valued assets in society” (p. 1). He then compares various

teaching practices to a sculptor's tools, like a chisel, mallet, or file. To further describe the artistic metaphor, Lemov says,

You learn to strike a chisel with a mallet. You refine the skill with time, learning at what angle to strike and how hard to drive the chisel. Years later, when and if your work makes it to a museum, observers will likely talk about what school of thought or theory it represents. But although lots of people conjure unique artistic visions, only those with an artisan's skill can make them real (p. 1).

Later in the introduction, he begins to make the shift to explain the comparison between education and teaching:

If you are reading this and you're a teacher who wants to improve your craft, my aim is to give you the tools to do that—to become one of those teachers who unlocks the latent talent and skill waiting in his or her students, no matter how many previous schools or classrooms or teachers have been unsuccessful in that task...and transform students at risk of failure into achievers and believers (p. 2).

Lemov essentially equates teachers as being sculptors who use their craft and skill with various tools to carve and shape their material into an art piece. Are students then stones the teacher is supposed to use their vision and craft to shape into the “achievers and believers” that Lemov mentions? I feel uncomfortable with the way this metaphor makes students into an object that I, as the teacher, am supposed to act on, as if they have no agency over their own lives and learning.

There may be a time and place where this metaphor of the teacher as a sculptor, if rethought, could be useful. For example, what if I imagine myself as a teacher to be a sculptor, but instead of my students being the stone, the stone is actually myself? And, what if my students

were also considered to be sculptors who were carving themselves, instead of me as the teacher sculpting them? Maybe there are moments when we can show each other a specific way to carve that helps us make the mark we are seeking in ourselves. There also might be times when we need help to shape, carve, or smooth an area of ourselves that is hard for us to reach alone. These ideas align better with the desire I have for teaching to be a relational act—horizontal, even—and therefore more interested in the co-construction of understanding, not merely the dissemination of prescribed bits of knowledge or shaping students into my idealized form of what I think a “successful” student is.

If Lakoff and Johnson (1980) were correct in their argument that metaphors are embedded and found within the rituals and forms of a culture, then it is not unreasonable to assume that the metaphors driving the beliefs and postures of teachers regarding education can be found and shaped through the syllabus. When we think of the syllabus as a contract or a permanent record, it says something about how we view education. Some of these views miss the mark; however, if the syllabus can be seen as a pliable material, then it leaves room for me to discover new metaphors that make possible new dreams, purposes, or possibilities for education and how I can hold myself as a teacher.

In this manner, my dissertation is an attempt to “extend the vocabulary” (Davis & Serra, 2000, p. 65) by playing with the syllabus as an artistic material and offering new metaphors or permissions to see the syllabus and teaching as something more diverse than the traditional metaphors that may be common among education. In his article “World Builders,” Jonathan Harris (2009), speaking to a group of web designers, says that “if we decide the humanity does not yet exist there [in the web] in the ways we expect, then we must create it” (Our Digital Crisis section, para. 13). Harris further says, “A language is basically a system for expressing ideas,”

and “when the world changes, sometimes a new language is needed to handle that change” (Language section, para. 2). So, as Harris seems to imply, we should interrogate the language and metaphors we are already using and determine if they are making the kinds of spaces or experiences we want for education and if we find that the languages or metaphors are inadequate or our desired language does not exist, we need to (re)create them. Maybe the right metaphors or language that capture our views of education already exist, but we don’t speak them, in that case, we should find them and learn to speak them so that we might be able to take the kind of teaching postures that we want to see in education.

In this process, I have tried to openly consider each way that others have approached the syllabus to see what they have to offer because each new perspective, even if it is absurd, impractical, or unconventional, can offer a way of thinking or a possible posture one could take, and even if I never take that posture, at least I know it is a possibility. In the book, *Who’s Afraid of Conceptual Art?*, Peter Goldie and Elizabeth Schellekens (2010) argue, by citing Anthony Savile (2006), that one way to assess the quality of an artwork is to judge how it “modifies our dispositions to think, to feel, and ultimately to act” (p. 133). While the authors were specifically speaking about art, their sentiment can be used to assess the value of any practice, metaphor, posture, or system by asking: Does this modify my disposition to think, to feel, and ultimately to act in a way that leads towards a greater ability to empathize, tolerate, discuss, and embrace multiple perspectives? Does it help heal, as Albert Camus (1968) said, “What has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again in a world so obviously unjust, give happiness a meaning once more poisoned by the misery of the century” (p. 135)? Does it create more laughter, happiness, or goodness in the world? If so, then embrace this new type of syllabus.

## **Significance of the Study**

In 2009, a group of individuals interested in investigating speculative and critically oriented design held the *Iapsis Forum for Design and Critical Practice*. Part of this forum consisted of an international seminar, an exhibition, and a publication called, “The Reader.” In this publication, Ramia Mazé, a professor of design for social innovation and sustainability at the London College of Communication, wrote an essay about critical design in which she offers three distinct spheres or avenues for one to engage in critical work: (1) Criticism towards one’s personal practice, (2) criticism about one’s discipline or field, and (3) criticism outside of one’s field which might address issues on a larger scale like social or political issues. In summary, Mazé (2009) explains these ideas in more depth:

To recap—criticality within our own personal practice can be seen in how we reflect upon our methods in order to locate our voice and articulate our position; criticality within a community of practice or discipline can be about trying to challenge or change traditions or paradigms; and criticality can also be targeted towards other issues and ideas outside design altogether (pgs. 395-397).

When I think of the significance of my study, it is something that hovers or shifts between the personal and discipline levels that Mazé describes. My dissertation attempts to critically examine myself as a teacher by locating and articulating my practice within the field of education. It is also a critique of my discipline’s—teaching/art education—methods, forms, frameworks, dogmas, and traditions regarding the syllabus and through the syllabus, curriculum and pedagogy.

### *Personal Significance*

When I say my dissertation research is personal, that might trigger a response from those who feel research or academic scholarship should have the personal removed from it to maintain a more objective stance, which, according to Sara Wilson McKay and Melanie Buffington (2013), is common in the positivist research paradigm. My work aligns more with the constructivist paradigm of research, which McKay and Buffington (2013), in the text *Practice Theory*, explain embraces subjectivity and a need to understand one's values and positionality to conduct quality research. Those who subscribe to a constructivist paradigm of research also generally accept that one's political, economic, ethnic, racial, religious, or gender identities will shape how one sees the world, meaning that truth and knowledge are socially constructed things (McKay & Buffington, 2013). In this regard, my research, how I hold myself as a teacher, and the way I think of the syllabus become a reflection of me. I am reminded of a discussion that the art educator, Juan Carlos Castro, had with his photography students. Castro (2007), in his article, "Constraints That Enable," tells of a time when he gave a prompt to his photography students to produce a self-portrait that did not have them physically in it. After completing the assignment and discussing it as a class, Castro writes, "By the end of the final group discussion, the general consensus was that almost everything we photograph is in some way a mapping of our perceptions onto the world around us, a bringing forth a micro-world within the macro-world" (p.75). There is something extraordinary about that conclusion, it can extend to include everything we say, do, and produce, being seen as a mapping of ourselves, or a self-portrait of sorts. In this way, this dissertation is a self-portrait of sorts, and for that reason, telling you a little about the position I write from then might be useful to you.

I write as a former middle school art teacher and current Ph.D. student in art education at the University of Illinois who is on the verge of becoming a professor of art education. I write as



someone who has spent years studying and attempting to apply educational theories, philosophies, and practices of education. I write as an artist, as a father, as a son, as a brother, and as a husband. I write as a religious person and as someone who deeply believes in the principle of love. I write as someone who likes to challenge traditions, but I also write as someone who has strong emotions when they walk up steps in the library that have been worn down over the years by the countless students who have climbed those same steps seeking knowledge, just like me. I write as a person who has spent years of my early life living in other countries in all sorts of situations. I write as the person who once tried to jump across a stream at a beach and ended up breaking my foot; I write as the person who still thinks that if I could just try again, I think I could make the jump without incurring any injury. Simply, I write as a human being that is full of complexity in my relationships and my thoughts and feelings.

It is impossible for me to convey all of who I am to you, yet what I offer here, in the form of my dissertation, is a manifestation of who I am. It is full of my subjectivities and despite my best efforts to be aware and thoughtful, I know it has limitations and biases in it. Therefore, being critical of myself and my practices as a teacher is so important and one of the impetuses of this dissertation.

Underlying these feelings is the belief that each person, especially teachers, can make a great impact on the world and on others in their spheres of influence. In this regard, I join with the art educators, McKay and Buffington (2013) in stating that I believe teachers are “powerful change agents” (p. 10) who have an influence on the lives of their students and in the shaping of what knowledge and world views are considered valid and valuable. However, many critical education scholars claim that teachers often teach the way they were taught, and without a practice of critical analysis of how their teacher postures, which includes both the theories and

practices that teachers use and subscribe to, might perpetuate exploitive, racist, outdated, or other repressive practices that might end up working towards a goal that is not wanted (McKay & Buffington, 2013; DéSautels & Laroche, 1997/1998; Biesta & Stengel, 2016; Pajares, 1992). I want to align my beliefs, values, and ideologies with what I say and do as a teacher and not allow aspects of my practices that may seem trivial, like writing a syllabus, to go unnoticed or unquestioned. I believe, as McKay and Buffington (2013) do, that critical self-reflection, or as the liberatory scholar, bell hooks (1994), calls it, “critical conscious,” is how a teacher can become more aware of their influence and power. My intent through much of this dissertation is to call into question my own practices and reveal the metaphors that underlie my teaching posture.

**A New Teaching Posture.** There is another reason behind my work that goes beyond self-criticality, I have been searching for a teaching posture that enables me to hold onto my personal beliefs and values, while still being able to function in the institutions of schooling, which has been challenging for me at times. When I first stepped into the whitewashed brick classroom in a middle school in rural Utah that would be my first classroom, I did not realize how complex and tensional teaching could be.

Before I began teaching, I studied art and completed a teaching licensure program that included a variety of theory and practicum courses, as well as a semester-long student teaching placement. During those courses, I was often presented with a variety of theories and approaches to teaching through lectures, texts, and observations of my teachers. Over time, as I thought about teaching, wrote curriculum and teaching philosophies, and practiced teaching in a variety of settings, I began to develop my own “teacher posture” or personal approach to being a teacher. While I may not have been fully aware of this fact in my mind then, I would have been able to

say confidently I know what it means to be a teacher. Despite my education and training, nothing could have fully prepared me for the reality of being a middle school art teacher. I discovered teaching was more than curriculum and pedagogy; it was the hundreds, if not thousands, of micro decisions I had to make each day regarding what kind of teacher I was going to be in the dynamic and complex landscape of schools.

Teaching involved going to meetings, collaborating with my department team members, doing lunch duty, helping kids open lockers, breaking up/preventing fights in the hallway, and being sent into the boy's bathroom to check on a vomiting student. Teaching was planning lessons with an impossibly small budget of 300 dollars for an entire school year. It was learning how to handle situations like kids fighting in class, refusing to do what I ask, or when a girl had her first menstrual cycle in my class and bled through her clothes. It was also having to pick out benefits for the first time and constantly getting advice about how to teach from more experienced teachers on which assignments to give, or how to handle situations x, y, or z, which often conflicted with someone else's advice and yet somehow was always backed by research studies. Teaching was managing factors that were outside of my control, but played a significant role in shaping how I taught, things like physical space, limitations of money or supplies, and class sizes. Teaching was being shamed by my principal because I wore a button-up shirt and jeans on my first day instead of a suit and tie like the other first-year teachers. Teaching was working with middle schoolers' emotions and hormones; it was working with my own emotions and hormones.

I initially thought the hardest part of teaching middle school might be dealing with the students, making lesson plans, or grading. In reality, I found interacting with my students and planning lessons to be some of the most rewarding elements of teaching. The most difficult part

of teaching was navigating the multitude of forces, tensions, and ideological battles that are abundant in educational spaces. The power dynamics, especially with my school administrators, instructional coaches, or district art coordinators, were not easy. Each person had their own ideologies that informed their beliefs and practices about education, which conflicted or aligned with my own. Some of the ideological differences had to do with the tensions between theory and practice, the philosophical debate about the nature of learning (something that can be transferred, versus something that is constructed), and the tension between traditional teacher-centered pedagogies and student-centered liberatory practices.

These tensions played out in almost every meeting, training, or interaction I had with my administrators, mentor teacher, and the district instructional coach. In my school, texts like John Hattie's (2008) *Visible Learning* and Doug Lemov's (2010) *Teach Like a Champion* were like holy scripture and vaunted for their pedagogical practices backed by data (it wasn't just my school that venerated Hattie's work, some have gone as far as calling his text the "Holy Grail" of education (Mansell, 2008) or compare Hattie to a messiah-like hero (Evans, 2012)). For the most part, these pedagogical strategies are based on student performance on standardized tests and utilize a more "teacher-centered" approach to teaching, which Cuban (1984) defines as an approach where the teacher controls much of the learning process. The teacher-centered paradigm traditionally treats teachers as an authority and expert who has knowledge that will be transferred to the students like an empty vessel or object (McLeod, 2018). My instructional coach once said to me, "You are the authority in that classroom; act like it," after I expressed a feeling of discomfort about some of the practices I was being asked to use. Now imagine as a first-year teacher trying to tell your instructional coach who has been teaching for twenty-five-plus years and whose evaluation is part of the process that determines if you will keep your job at

the end of the year that the metaphor she just used—teacher-as-authority—goes against how I want my students and I to relate to each other or how the metaphor of the teacher-as-sculptor used in her favorite instructional book seems to dehumanize students by comparing them to raw materials like stone that you as the teacher are supposed to shape. At the time, I couldn't have articulated those thoughts, let alone have the guts to say them aloud, but I did have a sense of discomfort, so much so, that I wrote the following reflection in my journal after having my coach tell me some of the ideas from Lemov's (2010) book:

Some of it is good and some of it I don't think is my style. I don't want to be arrogant because she has taught for twenty years or something and says, "This is the best way."

.... I better try out what she [is] saying (Ostraff, personal communication, 2015, n.d.).

My instructional coach was an experienced teacher with over twenty years of teaching science classes and was highly liked by students, administrators, and parents. She had developed a teaching practice that worked for her over the years based on what she saw working or failing, and she was trying to impart her wisdom to me, like a cherished gift, which I am still grateful for. However, I often felt conflicted between wanting to listen to people who had more experience teaching and the wisdom that comes from that experience and my own gut instincts or inner values. Sometimes, what worked for them didn't work for me. It was like trying on someone else's clothes and realizing they just don't fit my body. My situation was different from the situations that shaped my coach or principal's experiences because I was teaching an art class, with a completely different group of students that had their own dynamic natures and needs, and I was also different. Yet, whether it was the texts like Lemov's *Teach like a Champion* or the messages I was getting from my instructional coach, I was made to feel like there were "best practices" or "right ways" of teaching and "wrong ways," that did not address the diverse and

complex experience I was having in my unique classroom. It felt like the outcomes of education were very linear and singularly focused on student performance on standardized tests. While testing or the use of standards is not inherently bad, at times, these sorts of practices make it easy to focus only on knowledge that can be measured and observed through quantifiable methods. These practices can be harmful when they are used in an oppressive way that shifts the focus away from treating students holistically and makes it easier to neglect the emotional and social needs of students.

When I say “oppressive,” it is as an act that connotes a force that presses against or down, to compress together. The violent or forceful pressing pushes the dimensionality out of the thing until it is one thing only, a singular layer, a single culture, or a singular viewpoint. The opposite of oppression would be to allow things to expand, to take multiple dimensions, or become non-flat. Oppression, then, is an action that a person(s) or system takes to press multiple perspectives into a singular view. What seems to separate oppression from something else, like cooperation, which also may flatten perspectives into one view, is the use of power, force, or violence to flatten out all dimensionality and diversity.

This situation does not seem all that uncommon, McKay and Buffington (2013) note that many teachers feel a sense of powerlessness that comes from the common compliance culture that exists in schools. The educational scholars DéSautels and Larochelle (1997/1998), also make a note of this phenomenon, and claim, via citing Foucault (1975), that the current culture in schools favors “schemas of docility” (p. 2) and results in teachers feeling demoralized. To further illustrate this point, I add one more reference from the article “Thinking Philosophically About Teaching” by Gert Biesta and Barbara Stengel (2016):

It seems that teachers are sandwiched between principals whose job is apparently to tell them if and when they are good enough and students who may or may not be ready and willing to demonstrate what they do know on instruments that seem designed to seek out what they do not know. Instead of privileging teachers' judgment, such a system disempowers teachers and diminishes their professional prerogatives. Principals and teachers are working at cross-purposes, and teachers are encouraged to treat students as objectives of intervention only. The indeterminacy that is intrinsic to teaching is disregarded in favor of a causal view of teaching and learning (p. 58).

These scholars summarize well how I felt. I felt caught between trying to fit into the system I found myself in, yet still maintaining the core parts of who I was as a teacher. The graphic novelist, Gene Luen Yang, expresses how I felt, when in his graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* (2006), Yang portrays a young boy who is Chinese but grew up in America wanting to become a Transformer—robot in disguise—which was a toy that transforms from something ordinary like a semi-truck into a robot warrior. You might now be wondering how that fits at all with my experience, well, in the book, the boy, while waiting for his mom to get some medicine from an herbalist, tells the wife of the herbalist his desire to be like a transformer and the woman in response says, “It's easy to become anything you wish...so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul” (p. 29). Similarly, when I felt stuck between two cultures (the school culture and my own teacher beliefs), I felt like the boy who was caught between his Chinese culture and the American culture he was living in. I could either adopt the practices and embrace the metaphors that were being pushed on me by my coach, principals, or others, but risk losing my integrity because it went against my inner beliefs or find a way to take a different posture that might allow for both cultures to coexist.

I do need to mention that, to their credit, my administrators and instructional coaches were good teachers and mentors to me in many ways, and they allowed me the room to try things out for myself, albeit with some skepticism. They would listen when I tried to explain my pedagogical ideas or my philosophy of education, but I often struggled to express why I felt a certain way and back it up with logic or reasoning that held any weight in comparison to the data-backed practices that Hattie (2008) advocated for. My instructional coach would sincerely ask me, as the expert in art, what was my goal? What did I want students to be able to do or know after taking my class? I couldn't really answer her or articulate what was in my heart.

My initial approach was to help my students to think and act like contemporary artists. We talked about ideas, practiced all kinds of techniques, used a variety of materials, and for the most part, it was a positive outcome for everyone, but I kept wondering why. Why do I care if they can make good art? Was I trying to help them prepare for a career as artists? Was my objective to help them have an appreciation for art or develop other skills like how to think creatively? All of that? None of it? It felt presumptuous to reject certain teaching practices or philosophies about education when I didn't have an alternative.

What I did know is that there was a disconnect or incongruence between the practices I was using or being encouraged to use and the theory or intents that I felt but couldn't explain. It felt like our theory and values were not aligned with our practices. How can we say we care about student well-being and then feel okay with yelling at or berating students? How can we say that we care about teaching creative thinking and then employ a method that is completely controlled by the teacher? How can we say we care about student's health and feed them junk in the cafeteria or take away their time playing outside?



Teaching felt like a complex system made up of many moving parts, intentions, and goals. At times, these aspects of the system were made known, and at other times were hidden, making it even more complicated and difficult to fully understand. Between these contextual factors, the variety of ideological tensions, and differing beliefs or “truths” about what good education should be, made knowing what it meant to be a good teacher more difficult to determine. What I did know at that moment was something that Richard Shaull (1990) illustrates well in the foreword he wrote for Paulo Friere’s, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (p. 34).

I knew what I did as a teacher mattered, and all of the tensions and constraints that were pulling on me made it difficult, if not impossible, to find a posture that appeased each of them and aligned with my own inner values. I believe deep down that peace in one's soul comes from aligning your inner thoughts, world views, and goals with your actions. I was not at peace; I was in conflict. I needed to find firm ground to stand on. I realized there were a few options: I could conform to conventional ideals and practices that were held by my instructional coach/principal, I could quit teaching, or I could find some middle space that would allow me to function and align my inner beliefs with my practices, without drawing the ire of my administrators. This seemed like the best option.

In *I Won't Learn From You*, Herbert Kohl (1994) talks about his own moment of being a young teacher and experiencing a similar conflict. One example of this conflict was a time when

Kohl and an administrator had an argument over what kind of art materials were deemed appropriate for certain students. The administrator argued that students who achieved higher reading scores deserved better art materials, which meant that Kohl, who gave the “better” materials to all his students, including the “underperforming” students, was in the wrong. Kohl was bothered by these kinds of prejudiced practices that limited students' experiences based on things like age, class, race, or gender. Kohl often utilized practices that went against these bureaucratic decisions, resulting in him being fired from one of the schools he taught in. Kohl then realized that resisting the institution in the wrong way made it so he was no longer able to be in the system, he was out of the game, so to speak. He realized that he needed a way to exist between these two tensions, much like the concept of “in-dwelling” that Aoki (1986/1994) talked about. Kohl calls his posture of being between “creative maladjustment” (p. 130). As a result of these experiences Kohl writes:

When it is impossible to remain in harmony with one’s environment without giving up deeply held moral values, creative maladjustment becomes a sane alternative to giving up altogether. Creative maladjustment consists of breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one’s place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty—that is, it consists of learning to survive with minimal moral and personal compromise in a thoroughly compromised world and of not being afraid of planned and willed conflict, if necessary, It also means searching for ways of not being alone in a society where the mythology of individualism negates integrity and leads to isolation and self mutilation. It means small everyday acts of maladjustment as well as occasional major reconstruction, and it

requires will, determination, faith that people can be wonderful, conscious planning, and an unshakable sense of humor (p. 130).

Kohl's concept of creative maladjustment was taken from a speech that Martin Luther King Junior gave in May of 1958 at the University of California, Berkeley. In the speech, King says:

Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word. It is the word "maladjusted." Now we all should seek to live a well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things (as cited by Kohl 1994, p. 129).

Both King and Kohl acknowledge that there are times in life when we find ourselves in situations that go against our moral beliefs, and we must find ways to resist those forces and promote the change we want to see. Kohl's experience resonates with me because I love the institution of schooling. Like a true long-term relationship of love, I am committed to it despite its imperfections and flaws. Sometimes, in a relationship, there are ups and downs, but those who love each other don't give up when there is tension. If I question, push, or play with the materiality of schooling, it comes from a place of devotion and love to make it better. Maybe some of the ideas I share will seem like I just want to be funny, a jokester, or a troublemaker, but in reality, I see this work not as something that tears down, but as my honest effort to stay in the institution and find a way to exist and make it better by building it up.

My criticality of education starts with myself. Sometimes, I have felt uncomfortable with the power that I have as a teacher. Reading Paulo Freire's (1970/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and bell hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*, helped me realize I needed to stop hiding from the idea that I have power. Freire and hooks moved me to think more carefully about how I use power and instilled a desire to be more accountable for how I use my power to enact change in the world. I hold the view that every person is a world maker, even if that world is only their own. My goal as a teacher is to be more honest, aware, and responsible for what I do, which means paying close attention to the forces that are at play in the world.

I also want to move away from trying to tell others how to be liberated or forcing them to grapple with the topics I want to, which in some ways feels like another form of oppression. As a white male that grew up in a middle-class home, with two university professors as parents, am I really in a position to tell others how to be liberated from power? Instead, I want to look inwardly at myself, to examine my practices and my discipline's practices, because that is the space where I have significant power to make changes. By looking at my practices, particularly the syllabus, I am trying to use the power I have to build an environment that might allow for others to assert what they want out of their experience in education, or at the minimum, to become aware and responsible for what I am doing with and through the syllabus.

It is too easy as teachers to overlook our world-building efforts or the power we use. It is easy to write off the decisions we make as merely being part of the status quo. Biesta and Stengel (2016), in their philosophical analysis of teaching, acknowledge that the "ways we think, feel, and act are "disciplined" by dominant discourses" (p. 49). Is it sufficient to enact harm and say "Well, that was how I was raised"? As teachers, it may be easy to use language or certain forms for our syllabi and claim it was "required by our administration" or "I was just using the syllabus

that my department or past instructor gave me.” Saying these things cannot remove the fact that we touched it, made it, and/or allowed the thing already made to exist and be reaffirmed. We may not be able to change and make those worlds become exactly like we want, but we can at least acknowledge it and still take ownership. “I chose this because of ...” or “I did it knowing these things...” Maybe being a good teacher is recognizing the power and authority I do have and using that for something that I care about and can defend. I can look into the eyes of a thirteen-year-old and honestly say, “I believe in the thing I am teaching and this is why.”

In summation, while much of these thoughts are personal and come from experiences teaching in public schools, they can be applicable to other teachers at all levels, or at least, I hope that like me, other teachers are thinking critically about what it means to be a teacher and trying to be more conscientious of what that means. I end this section by sharing one last thought that came to me after I read Mark Monmonier’s (2018) book about maps, titled, *How to Lie With Maps*. When I read that title, I was intrigued by the dual ways the word “lie” could be understood. Maybe the straightforward interpretation is the one that Monmonier clearly means, which is to deceive, as evidenced here:

Not only is it easy to lie with maps, it’s essential. To portray meaningful relationships for a complex, three-dimensional world on a flat sheet of paper or a video screen, a map must distort reality. As a scale model, the map must use symbols that almost always are proportionally much bigger or thicker than the features they represent. To avoid hiding critical information in a fog of detail, the map must offer a selective, incomplete view of reality. There’s no escape from the cartographic paradox: to present a useful and truthful picture, an accurate map must tell white lies (p. 1).

I was disappointed that Monmonier never pointed to the way “lie” could also be interpreted as coming alongside something and lying by its side, next to it. I thought this idea, the idea, that as a teacher, I cannot escape the complexities and tensions that exist within the educational landscape but I can learn to lie with it, was beautiful to me. We cannot study everything. Yet, how we determine what to talk about (curriculum) and how (pedagogy) is the crucial problem. It is about power and politics. As I have come to see this realization, it has helped me feel like I can lie with the parts of education that make me uncomfortable and with the parts I love, which enables me to stay in education.

### ***Significance for the Field of Art Education***

I now turn towards some of the significant things that I see my dissertation offering to the broader field of education. Up to this point, I have talked about the personal side of the dissertation, which focuses on my teacher identity. In the introduction of “Attunement Through the Body,” Shigenori Nagatomo introduces their work as a “Personal lyricism cast in a philosophical language” (1992, P. xv). I frame my work similarly; my work is a personal artwork cast in a theoretical language. While theory may suggest merely thinking of something in an abstract or removed way, I try to take it up in the space where theory and practice are seen as intertwined, a space closer to a posture where my beliefs and actions are one. As mentioned earlier, the syllabus is commonplace within education and holds a significant place of importance; however, it seems to have gone relatively unstudied on a theoretical basis, particularly when it comes to the history of the syllabus (Snyder, 2009) and its technical form (Luke, et al., 2013). Many scholars have noted this gap or lack of theoretical scholarship about the syllabus (Snyder, 2009; Seitz, 2019; Luke, et al., 2013; Parkes & Harris, 2010; Germano & Nicholls, 2020; Thompson, 2007). I envision my work in this dissertation to be a small gesture

towards addressing this apparent gap in the literature. By studying the evolution of the syllabus and the way it has been used, talked about, and experienced, I hope to discover the areas of resistance and pliability that inherently make up the essence of the syllabus as a material. I hope to then use that intimate knowledge of how this material behaves to find avenues to use the syllabus to imagine new possibilities, permissions, vocabulary, or metaphors that make new postures for teaching possible, ones that may allow for education to be seen as being more dynamic, relational, and responsive to the complex tensions that are found in education. I want to make visible what has been lost, forgotten, or yet unseen and make strange the familiar. Once we see a thing being made or know the process it was made through, we inherently know that it can also be remade, dismantled, or altered.

There is a part of me that feels a bit squeamish to claim this work as theory-making. However, most of the squeamishness comes from the false perception I have about what it means to be doing research or theorizing. In Samuel Rocha's (2020) text *Syllabus as Curriculum*, Rocha simply states that a theory is simply "a *developed* idea. In other words, every theory is an idea, but not every idea is a theory" (p. 110). Rocha goes on to further describe theory-making as a practice of "reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing, thinking and re-thinking" (p. 71). This process might feel like a curious contradiction. How can an idea be developed if it is continually rewritten or rethought? Rocha seems to be suggesting that the core actions of theory-making are a constant engagement with an idea through thinking, reading, and writing, which can be interpreted more figuratively to mean any actions we make on the world can be seen as an act of writing or inscribing, and any way of taking in information from the outside can be seen as reading. Through reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing, an idea is developed into a theory. This concept of theory-making may be the same concept at the heart of research itself.

The concepts of research or theory-making center on the idea of return or repetition. The “re” part of research suggests actions of looking again, “searching again and again for something” (Rocha, 2020, p. 104). Lorrie Blair (2016) echoes this sentiment in her text on how to write a dissertation, she said, “The heart of research is “search” and to search is to look for something unknown” (p. 28). Another potent example can be found in the way Wiebe, et al., (2015) described the etymology of the word “study,”

It is etymologically plausible that study is related to being steeped. The student, not unlike a teabag, needs to soak in knowledge - knowledge that is relational, intimate, and contextually relevant to lived experience - the longer the better. ... [T]he long-soaking approach to study where one becomes steeped in knowledge . . . [replaces] an economic urgency to produce, (p. 236)

These thoughts on the word study remind me of the way Jorge Lucero (2018) speaks about the etymology of the words “theory” and “theatre,” which have the same root origins, which can provide a different lens to understand those words:

Theory is like theatre, you behold it. It is beheld. ... Be exposed to it. Sometimes repeatedly. ... Perhaps, upon encountering the production again, something different will be noticed. Perhaps that event will jive with the previous encounter or a totally different production. Perhaps the audience member will only notice what they have noticed prior, but this time because they are slightly older—because they have a few more experiences—the thing they recognize now looks slightly different. And this is how you move beyond knowing about theory to understanding the material of the work you do (working through theory), even if that work looks nothing like the theory/theatre that inspired it (p. 5).



Again, the action is a return, coming back to, sitting with something for a duration and examining that thing through as many different lenses as possible.

While I don't claim to know everything about the syllabus, I have spent an above-average amount of time thinking about the syllabus. I don't think there has been a day in the past two years that I didn't think about the syllabus in some way or another. In fact, the syllabus has been on my mind and has permeated into many facets of my life, so much so, that I dream at night about the syllabus. As a father of two young children, I am frequently woken up in the middle of the night to comfort and lay with them in their beds. While I am cramped on their twin mattress, listening to their breathing and attempting to fall back asleep, my thoughts slide to the syllabus. In fact, much of my dissertation on the syllabus as artistic material was composed in those middle of the night hours. It is not just in sleep that I think about the syllabus; it is everywhere, all the time. Something as seemingly random as walking on a path or seeing chairs around a fire ring makes me think of the syllabus, which might seem absurd, but for me makes sense when you consider the pedagogical similarities. Let me explain.

A couple of summers ago, I was visiting my parents and suggested that they finally buy some chairs and a fire ring and put it under the pergola (shade structure) that we built a few years earlier but never used because they had no chairs. My parents obliged and bought a small metal fire ring and eight lawn chairs to go around it. That evening, someone lit a fire, and soon, members of my family began to gather around the fire. My mom came out with a bowl of popcorn, and we (a collection of parents, kids, grandkids, cousins, and siblings) sat around eating, talking, and telling stories late into the night, laughing, and enjoying being together. In the next few days, more of the same activity happened. Sometimes, the conversations were trivial, like playing a game of "Would You Rather," in which we would present two choices that

people would have to choose from, and sometimes they were more serious in nature, like my brother and I talking late at night about our beliefs about God and religion. The little grandkids also found a way to use the chairs for their own purposes and pretended that they were forts in their imaginary game. The magic of it all was that the chairs and the fire ring invited and made possible a whole variety of activities that were important to our family, without anyone having to control or coax others in to doing something, the desired activity happened on its own because the structure was there to make it possible.

At that time, I was just beginning this dissertation work and was struck by the way the chairs and the fire ring immediately invited a certain behavior by simply being there. I knew my parents agreed to spend the money to buy those chairs because they wanted to facilitate us being able to spend time together. They didn't contrive some artificial thing to make us connect, they simply made it so that natural interactions could occur in a space of proximity. They had an intent behind creating the space to sit and be together that also allowed for new purposes to emerge (the kids using the chairs in their imaginary play). This feels a lot like the way that teachers might use a syllabus to invite certain behaviors or actions being taken by their students that they believe will be beneficial to their learning (reading certain texts or engaging in a certain assignment), but also allow for new emergent possibilities to occur. I was also struck by something that Parkes and Harris (2010), point out in their often-cited article, "The Many Purposes of the Syllabus," they explain that the syllabus can be a guide for learning outside of the classroom when the teacher is not in the presence of the students, in this way, the syllabus extends the influence of the teacher. Maybe the fire ring is a way of extending the intent of my parents for their family to connect with each other without them having to be there controlling

the situation all the time; it allows for that behavior to occur organically and in the right moments.

In a metaphorical sense, I have made connections to the way a fire ring with chairs around it might share some similarities to the syllabus. As you read on, you will be able to read in greater detail more of the potentially absurd thoughts that I have had about the syllabus, as well as my reasoning for thinking them. I have tried to think of the syllabus from many different angles or push it into new spaces simply to see what each of those lines of inquiry might reveal about the materiality of the syllabus, and, through this proxy, teaching. I have thought and re-thought and written and re-written many of these ideas about the syllabus and present to you, my journey. With these thoughts in mind, I argue that my work is theory-making.

**Syllabus as System.** Taking up the syllabus as a topic of study, or topic to theorize about, with the intent to understand its nature and how it functions as a material, is more complex and difficult than one might think. In *Thinking in Systems*, Donella Meadows (2008), a renowned systems analyst, explains that “the behavior of a system cannot be known just by knowing the elements of which the system is made,” but is more complicated because one needs to understand how all the parts are interconnected to fulfill a specific purpose (p. 4). Many times, the interconnections and inherent structures in systems can be hard to see, resulting in a lack of understanding and hidden behaviors going unnoticed. Meadows used the example of a slinky, a helical spring toy, to illustrate this fact. When it is held in the palm, one may think they know the nature of the slinky, but not until it is released and the slinky begins to spring and recoil does one truly understand the inherent behavior of the slinky. The syllabus is similar to the slinky in that it’s easy to see the outward and traditional mechanisms or purposes and forget to examine the

form or way all the parts are working together in practice, this is especially true because the syllabus, in many ways, is more abstract than a physical material.

It is here that I see the value of conceptual art practices. To clarify, when I say “conceptual art practices,” I am speaking of the practices or ways that artists test the materiality of their artistic materials, or their “way-of-being” (p. 88) or “mode of operating” (p. 88), as my dissertation advisor, Jorge Lucero (2011), describes in his dissertation titled *Ways of Being: Conceptual Art Modes-Of-Operation for Pedagogy as Contemporary Art Practice*. Lucero claims that many conceptual art practices are centered on the idea of testing the materiality and pliability of materials. He further suggests that education and its institutions ought to be considered an artistic material that can be tested just like any other artistic material (see Lucero, 2011, 2014). These modes are useful in making it possible to see schooling as a material and offer a methodology or outline to test a material’s pliability and not allow knowledge of that material to merely be informed by how others see it. The playful and questioning practices of artists may bring forward the hidden nature of the syllabus. Nadine Kalin (2012), a professor of art education at the University of North Texas, does exactly this by creating a “dangerous syllabus” (p. 47), a supplemental syllabus that attempts to reveal the hidden curriculum present in higher education that is normally not shown to students. In the article, Kalin introduces this “dangerous syllabus,” and claims, citing Bishop (2007), that, “The straitjacket of efficiency and conformity that accompanies authoritarian models of education seems to beg for playful, interrogative, and autonomous opposition. Art is just one way to release this grip” (p. 43). Kalin’s gesture of playing with the syllabus to reveal the hidden curriculum reminds me of the way the performance artist Allen Kaprow used his artistic practice to question and play with systems of power and other conventions of everyday life. In Kaprow’s (1997) article, “Just

Doing,” he explains that “the playground for experimental art is ordinary life” (p. 103) and “play, of course, is at the heart of experimentation” (p. 104). Kaprow further explains that playing with everyday life is simply looking closer and paying attention to what is conventionally hidden. Through his various artistic performances, Kaprow, generated spaces where he could call into question the pre-existing power systems or make the conventional seem odd, thus allowing participants or viewers of his work to become aware of the power dynamics behind much of our everyday. As one positioned within the institution, I hope to become what Verwoert, et al., (2010) call the “ghost in the machine,” or someone who works from within the system to bring about change (p. 184). I see the work of Kaprow and Lucero as an invitation or permission to examine and play with the notion of syllabus, to look for new perspectives, and to hunt for ways that the form of the syllabus can be made more pliable. As a result, I hope to no longer wield an inherited tool/practice naively, but to become more aware of what I am employing or creating and how it is being used.

While arts-based research methodologies and the permissions of conceptual artist's practices are the primary methodologies I am using to guide my research, I take some concepts from other areas to contextualize the work I am doing. There is a component of my research that fits into a historical analysis lens, which focuses on the evolution of syllabus as a form over time (Snyder, 2009). There is also a philosophical tone to some of my work which investigates how the syllabus fits within the conversation of education and curriculum studies (Rocha, 2020). These frameworks give permission to consider education and its forms, materials, and practices, or syllabus in this case, as artistic material that can be tested just like any other artistic material (see Lucero, 2011, 2014; Davis & Serra, 2000). As a result of examining and playing with the

notion of the syllabus in this way, I hope to expand the vocabulary surrounding the syllabus and contribute to the theorization of it as a critical practice of teaching.

## **Research Design**

There are three modes to my research: The first mode is the “present at hand” mode which I borrow from the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1927/1962) to describe a mode of looking at something free from its usefulness and focusing more on its material qualities. This mode is where the playful testing of material to see what it does, where it is pliable, or how it resists occurs. In this mode, I have tried to focus on investigating the materiality and conceptual nature of the syllabus, attempting to get at the essence of what a syllabus is by using a variety of methods ranging from historical analysis, conceptual art practices (see Lucero, 2011, 2014; Davis & Serra, 2000), systems theory (Meadows, 2008), and arts-based research (Rolling, 2010); White, Garoian, & Garber, 2010; Irwin & Ricketts, 2013). An important aspect of this mode is a commitment to suspend my own taste or preexisting ideas that cloud me from seeing the materiality of the syllabus more clearly.

I have found it challenging at times to keep an open mind and not portray one way of teaching or using a syllabus as being all bad. As Biesta and Stengel (2016) wisely point out, “A particular pedagogical relation brings both affordances and constraints, complicating the notion that any one pedagogical relation could be designated as ideal for all times and purposes” (p. 44). Every metaphor or way of using a syllabus presents both affordances and limitations for what kinds of postures a teacher could take. The design researcher, Donald Norman (2013) defines an affordance as, “A relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (p. 11). What I call “limitations,” Norman calls, “anti-affordance,” which, “prevents a certain action” (p. 11).

Basically, each limitation or affordance designates and invites a certain posture or action to be taken or creates friction that prevents a behavior from occurring. According to Norman, good design is then about using affordances, limitations, and signifiers, which are the mechanisms designers use to communicate to users how an object is to be used and where the action should take place, to shape a positive user experience. Norman describes the reasons why tools and objects are not neutral; they have intent built into them and actively work to shape how we use them. In the book *Things That Make Us Smart*, Norman (1993) states,

Technology is not neutral. Each technology has properties—affordances—that make it easier to do some activities, harder to do others: The easier ones get done, the harder ones neglected. Each has constraints, preconditions, and side effects that impose requirements and changes on the things with which it interacts, be they other technology, people, or human society at large. Finally, each technology poses a mind-set, a way of thinking about it and the activities to which it is relevant, a mind-set that soon pervades those touched by it, often unwittingly, often unwillingly. The more successful and widespread the technology, the greater is impact upon the thought patterns of those who use it, and consequently, the greater its impact upon all of society. Technology is not neutral; it dominates (p. 243).

Instead of labeling any affordance as “bad” or “good,” I have tried to see instead what it enables or limits. The labeling of “good” or “bad” may come later when trying to evaluate if this accomplishes the established goals or intentions. But at this stage, I have tried to only focus on what is afforded or limited and how those can be made pliable by thinking more generously.

The second mode is comprised of taking a more speculative or imaginative posture, where I make a series of speculative propositions or mini-case studies that provide permissions

to think about the syllabus in a more expansive way. I am inspired by Luis Camnitzer, the Uruguayan artist, curator, art critic, and academic, who once said, “The work of art becomes a metaphor that gives access to preexisting reality, understanding it, collaborating with it, and transforming it” (Camnitzer, 2020, p. 147). Using the affordances and limitations that I identified in the first mode, I have tried to find ways to collaborate with, understand, or transform these preexisting metaphors. Sometimes, I focus on a traditional or concretized image of the syllabus and examine how that view limits or affords certain kinds of postures. At other times, I took a certain view and flipped it over to examine it in a new light to see a new possibility. For example, instead of the syllabus being something that we can only write at the beginning of the semester, I propose that the syllabus could be something that is rewritten or added onto throughout a course. The syllabus in this perspective becomes a living document that affords a more emergent and responsive teaching posture.

The third mode is the reflective or analytic part of my dissertation, where I examine the implications of the thoughts, proposals, or creative gestures I have made on a personal level and towards the field of art education as a whole. In line with a constructivist paradigm of research (see McKay & Buffington, 2013), where knowledge is co-constructed, I want my work to be a catalyst for further critical thought and ongoing dialogue regarding the syllabus that has potential to evolve over time.

I have stated I am using arts-based research methodologies informed by conceptual art practices, which might make you wonder where or which parts of this dissertation are the “art” parts. I see all of them as being part of this methodology. To explain a bit more, I return to a few ideas that Goldie and Schellekens (2010) share in their book, *Who’s Afraid of Conceptual Art?*. Goldie and Schellekens claim that art functions as a tool that “helps us appreciate our own



humanity in a special way” (p. 132). Further elaborating on this idea, Goldie and Schellekens cite Anthony Savile (2006),

What is special about art, Savile says, is that: second nature is presented as if it were actual nature. Thus, the spectator is presented with a view of some topic or theme as if already imbued with significance, one which in the case of beautiful art moves him to adjust his ways of thinking about and responding in feeling to that theme as it potentially occurs in real life itself (pgs. 132-133).

There are several points to unpack in this statement: To begin, I turn to the art critic, John Ruskin (1885), who once claimed, “The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way” (p. 286). What Ruskin describes, but is not explicitly mentioned in Savile’s quote, is that an artist had to first see something (this can be understood to mean more than physical sight) that they deemed to be significant in some way, or like Goldie and Schellekens suggest, helps us to ponder the experience of being human. Or, to turn back to the sculptor, Richard Serra, who said he wanted to “extend the vocabulary” (Davis & Serra, 2000, p. 65) of what could be done with steel, he first had to know the vocabulary that already existed before he could extend it. The second part of what Ruskin said, is the part where a person tells others about it, which is what Savile explains well. The piece of art, in whatever form, becomes the catalyst for others to reflect on the theme or topic that the artist deemed as being significant. The viewer, which could also be the artist, may be moved to adjust their ways of thinking or feeling towards that thing when experienced in real life. In other words, “the work of art can have a deep sense for us only if it exercises its force when we are no longer in its presence if it modifies our dispositions to think, to feel, and ultimately to act” (Savile, as cited by Goldie & Schellekens, 2010, p. 133). Out of this dialogue, there are three modes that I have

discussed: (1) Artists learn what their materials can do by testing them and knowing how they have been used previously, enabling them to see things of significance and things that are possible with that material. (2) Artists use what they know to push the boundaries or extend the material. This process of making or playing is a way of knowing and asking questions or presenting ideas of significance that can be answered or attempted to be answered through making. (3) Artists reflect on their work and assess what was made, the processes used, and how it changed the way they think, act, and feel and enabled them to take a different posture because of the making.

Traditionally, art and pedagogy may be seen as two different things, but as Luis Camnitzer, argues, these two things are not all that different and can actually be one and the same thing (Camnitzer, 2020). Camnitzer, in a lecture at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, discussed the lack of definition for what art is and stated, “the indeterminacy is the fertile ground in which art navigates best” (Camnitzer, 2022, 04:05). Out many possible functions and meanings of art, Camnitzer highlights one that for him is the most significant: “art as a tool for cognition” (04:42) which puts art in the realm of education and a “cultural agent” (Camnitzer, 2022, 04:42). Thinking of art as tool for cognition resonates with me. Similarly, Pablo Helguera (2009), in “Notes Toward a Transpedagogy,” claims artmaking does not offer a way to represent the world “but rather to misrepresent, so that we can discover new questions” (p. 112). We can replace misinterpret with the following: “to misuse” (p. 100), “to abstract” (p. 106), or “aura of ambiguity” (p. 106). Essentially these terms describe a way of playing with the traditional structures, practices, and institutions of education leading to new possibilities. Standing in the in-between or the “tentative locations” (Helguerra, 2009, p. 112) that mark the overlap between pedagogy and art can lead to new meaning. It seems when

we stand in between, we bring understanding from both worlds, which can help us see each side in a new light.

### **A Concluding Thought**

This introduction should tell you some important things about my dissertation, but it's also a way of acknowledging myself to you. As I sat composing this dissertation, I often imagined having conversations with my readers, which I share to point out that I see this work as a conversation. In this sense, I am attempting to bring out the etymological origin of the word *dissertation*, which means a discussion, debate, or discourse. This might suggest a need for others to discuss and engage with my work in order to activate it as a dissertation. With that in mind, I see this dissertation as a conversation between me and the wider field of education, but even more than that, I see it as a conversation with you. I am extending my hand and inviting you to sit with me in conversation on these topics. Like the artist, Matthew Goulish (2000) does in his book *39 Microlectures*, I make an invitation to read this text as a creative act. I offer this work to you, if it is of use to you on your journey, then I am glad, if it is not of use, then I understand. Please read it as you will. While you don't need my permission, I still give it.

## Chapter 2: Material, Metaphors, and Methodologies

I recognize that some of the ideas, vocabulary, or claims that I brought up in the previous chapter may need some unpacking or further contextualization given beyond the brief explanation that I provided in the introduction. The intent of this chapter is to further acquaint you with some of these keywords or ideas, which I have done by trying to imagine what questions you might be thinking at this moment, and, hopefully, addressing them in a sufficient way that will allow us to continue our journey together.

### The Central Metaphor

The first thing that needs some unpacking is the title of my dissertation, “Syllabus as Artistic Material.” This is a metaphor. Recognizing this fact is important because it is through this metaphor, which compares or places the syllabus alongside artistic materials, that I have framed much of the theoretical framework of my dissertation. Before moving into a greater discussion of this metaphor, it may be beneficial for you to understand how I define and use the term *metaphor*, as these conceptions inform why I have used a metaphor as the central point of my dissertation.

### Metaphors

The term *metaphor* typically is understood as a figure of speech or cognitive tool that humans use to make meaning by comparing something that is familiar to something that is unfamiliar or placing two things together that may not typically be placed together, but create a new understanding of those things; it is the writing of one system over another. I use metaphors frequently as I attempt to help my children gain an understanding of the world around them. For example, my kids can be picky eaters, especially if they have not eaten a certain food before. It can be helpful to compare a new foreign food that I want them to eat, which they are unsure of,

to something they have tried before and liked (i.e., the other day I made a sandwich for my daughter by putting marinara sauce and cheese inside two pieces of bread and grilled it in our waffle iron. At first, she was skeptical and wouldn't try it because it was new and looked "yucky." However, when I said it was just like a cheese pizza, which she likes, she began to nibble at it and discovered it was indeed like cheese pizza and continued to eat the rest of the sandwich). In this regard, *metaphor*, whose root words mean to transfer across or carry over, can be understood as a "movement, either mental or actual, from one place (conceptual or literal) to another," according to Alison Cook-Sather (2006), whose text *Education as Translation*, initially led me to think about metaphors as cognitive tools. Cook-Sather further claims that the root origins of words like "study" (*studere*-meaning to study or strive after something)," "education" (*educare*- to lead out or bring up), or "teach" (*lehren*-to lead or show the way) all connote that the essence of educational processes can be traced back to movement and change.

At the heart of metaphor is the act of distinguishing or recognizing the differences or similarities among disparate things, and through these distinctions, meaning emerges. As Kenneth Burke, states in *A Grammar of Motives* (1945/1969), "Metaphor is a device for seeing something *in terms* of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this" (p. 503). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), argue that, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 7). It is not just our ability to perceive differences or similarities that is important, but the way we refer to these metaphors at a future point. This allows us to reason about our models of the world, which Lakoff and Johnson say make metaphors "a matter of imaginative rationality (p. 235). Metaphors, as I have described so far, are mechanisms of transfer, but as Lakoff and Johnson argue, metaphors can also be seen as the primary mental systems or

mechanisms we use to make sense of the world around us. As such, Lakoff and Johnson believe that metaphors are “one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness” (p. 134). These metaphors become the frameworks that direct how we think and behave, which Lakoff and Johnson argue means that,

The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual systems thus play a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor (p. 3).

Metaphors described in this way, go beyond being a figure of speech that helps us transfer meaning from one place to another, but are the primary structures that inform how we think, act, feel, and perceive the world around us.

In this way, we might think of metaphors as being the same thing as “schema,” which Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist known for his work on child development, defined as the mental building blocks that form an individual’s mental representation of the world (Piaget, 1954, 1969). Barry Wadsworth (2004), the author of *Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive and Affective Development*, describes schema as parcels of knowledge that instruct individuals on how to react to incoming stimuli. Piaget suggested that children develop schema in phases, which build on previous knowledge. As children experience new situations, they make sense of the new stimuli

through their preexisting schema<sup>2</sup>. While I use the words “metaphor” or “schema” to reference mental models of the world, Frank Pajares, in an article for the journal “Review of Educational Research” (1992), says there are many terms that reference the systems that form our beliefs as teachers:

They travel in disguise and often under alias-attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the literature (p. 309).

Each of these terms, despite their uniqueness, describe a system that a person uses to inform how they think, act, or feel. When it comes to teaching, these metaphors or other terms, shape what I call “teacher posture,” which is the way a teacher holds themselves in relation to others (i.e., students, colleagues, parents) and the other factors such as their personal philosophies of education, state educational mandates, funding or class size, social movements, and so on.

Teacher posture is defined by the “hundreds, if not thousands, of micro decisions made each day by teachers regarding what kind of teacher they will be in relation to the dynamic and complex landscape of schools” (Ostraff, 2023, p. 3). Teacher posture is more than a physical stance or a set of practices a teacher uses in the classroom; it includes both the attitudes, beliefs, values, and worldviews that inform the teaching practices as well as the situational contexts in which

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<sup>2</sup> Some of Piaget’s theories, particularly his cognitive learning theory, has been challenged and disproved because children’s development is varied and does not adhere to the categories or stages Piaget suggested (see Keating, 1979; Hughes, 1975; Baillargeon & Devos, 1991; McLeod 2018). While I support the criticism of Piaget’s stages of development, I think his theories on the development of schema are still relevant.

teachers find themselves. In other words, teaching posture, like our own physical posture, is in its nature dynamic, complex, and highly situational.

### ***Posture***

The word *posture* is traditionally used to describe the positioning and alignment of a body. Yosifon and Stearns (1998), in their article on the rise and fall of American posture traditions, claim that posture has been a common issue within the cyclical ebbs and flows of American culture for over a hundred years. Phrases like “stand up straight,” “get your elbows off the table,” “quit slouching,” or the cautionary threat, “If you are not careful, you will grow up like that,” are common and may bring to mind an older generation instructing a younger one in proper etiquette and manners. Today, it is common to hear how people are developing back and neck pain due to the poor posture that develops from the amount of time spent looking down at electronic devices or sitting at a desk for long hours (see Muppavram, et al., 2018; Lee, et al., 2021; Carini, et al., 2017). There is also the pejorative sense of the word connoting an attempt to impress or mislead (“quit posturing,” “He has such a macho posture,” etc.). The term, *posture*, typically means the relative positioning of the body, the attitude, pose, or way a person holds themselves. However, posture can be both a physical description and something that describes attitudes, beliefs, or behavior *in relation* to context and situation.

While I knew posture could be used to mean something figurative (i.e., asking what someone's posture on a topic was, or in the use of posturing, as in telling someone to quit pretending or being pretentious), it wasn't until interacting with Jorge Lucero that posture began to take a more conceptual understanding in my vocabulary that moved beyond posture only describing a physical positioning of the body.



Posture, in a physical sense, describes how a person holds their body at any given moment. Carini, et al, (2017), scientists specializing in Posturology (the study of posture), describe posture as simply “the position of the body in space” (p. 12). However, this makes posture feel like something that is static—more like a snapshot capturing a moment of action—or like a noun, something that simply is. In an article for the *Journal of Health and Physical Education*, Mabel Todd (1920) addresses this exact situation when she says the idea of posture “carries with it an idea of *position* and *fixity* instead of the fact of the incessant interplay between forces and materials for equilibrium” [italics added for emphasis] (p. 13). For Todd, realizing that everything in nature moves and flows should make us realize that posture is no different; it is a system of constant equilibrium. Todd (1931) also adamantly reminds us that, “We must never lose sight of the fact that the human being is a *unit*, a community of interests” (p. 14). A similar sentiment is shared by Donella Meadows (2008), a well-known systems analyst, who said the human body is one of the most magnificent examples of a complex system characterized by “integrated, interconnected, self-maintaining complexity” (p. 3). While seeing posture as the “position of the body in space” is not wrong, it can be misleading and make it easy to forget and/or not fully appreciate the way posture is the product of a complex and dynamic human system. A great example of posture as a dynamic and relational system is the Japanese game show called, “Brain Wall,” or its American counterpart, “Hole in the Wall.”

**The Hole in the Wall.** The game is simple, a moving wall with a cutout hole moves towards the game show participant(s), who have to find a way to pose their body in such a way as to pass through the hole in the wall or be knocked into a pool of water (See Figure 4). The rules of the game make the outcome simple, fast, and fun.

**Figure 4**

*Hole in the wall Game Show*



While seemingly simple, there are a series of complex-dynamic decisions going on as each person attempts to make the right pose. They first must see the hole and accurately assess the shape and size they will need to make their body. Then there is the positioning of the body to take an accurate pose, which consists of a series of coordinated events between a variety of body parts. They need to maintain balance while making the pose, which is dependent on the person's body shape and size, flexibility and physical strength, and ability to accurately perceive the correct shape. This is all happening in rapid succession in the few seconds the players get before the wall reaches them. As the wall approaches, they are making fine adjustments to their posture to fit the hole.

For me, this exemplifies how posture is an outcome or behavior that arises from the relationship between the individual and their environment. In each consecutive round, the

participants are faced with a new wall. The posture that got the participant through the first wall will not be the right one for the next. The participants need to constantly adjust their posture to the environment to ensure their pose aligns with their goal of making it through the wall.

One of the best parts of this game show is the immediate and simple way of determining whose posture was successful—the participant is either knocked into the water or makes it through the hole. There are times when the participants take poses that are not aligned to the cutouts in the wall, but instead of being knocked into the pool of water, they brake the wall itself (see Figure 5). While this is probably not intended by the makers of the game show, it provides a third option or outcome—break the wall. This shows an important, and maybe overlooked, part of posture. The posture we take can be shaped by the external environment and forces surrounding us, but the postures we take can also have the power to shape those same spaces in return. Determining if a posture is “good” or “bad” is situational and subjective to what outcomes are desired.

**Figure 5**

*Breaking of the Wall*



This Japanese game show is a rather unique situation that may be great for showing some of the principal elements of posture: it is the product of a complex system that is relational to dynamic contexts and situations. However, most of our lives are not experienced on a game show where we are posing our bodies to fit through a wall. In regular life, we do not usually pay attention to posture the same way. We just allow our body to go about its business maintaining balance and adjusting automatically to the forces around us.

While posture may predominantly be associated with describing how one holds their physical body, it can also be used in a figurative sense to mean a state or “way of being” (Lucero, 2011, p. 88) that is holistic and made up of an individual’s attitudes, approaches, and values in relation to a certain circumstance or position. In his book *Teacher as Artist-In-Residence*, Jorge Lucero (2020) talks about taking a posture “as an educator, citizen, person” (p. 22), which suggests that posture or the way someone holds themselves is related to identity, positionality, and the contextual space they occupy. When Jorge speaks of posture, he speaks about it as a “way of being” in the world (Lucero, 2011, p. 88) or the way a person holds themselves physically or metaphorically in relation to something else (teaching, others, the world, God, etc.). Much of Jorge’s work asks questions about the ways that conceptual artists’ “ways of being” or “modes of operating” (Lucero, 2011, p. 88) could be seen as permissions for teachers to rethink the materiality of schooling. Postures then become permissions—new ways of being—that grant us possibilities, and even if we do not take those postures, at least we know they are possible. *Teacher-as-Conceptual Artist*, a metaphor that Jorge uses to merge his teacher identity with his artist identity (Lucero, 2011, 2018, 2020), is also an integral metaphor or posture I have taken for myself. Teaching posture represents a mindset at the point of action. It is

both conceptual and practical. It is what is happening internally and encompasses how we think, act, and feel *in relation* to a specific moment and context.

### ***Moments of Disequilibrium***

All metaphors or postures will reach a place where they fall apart or where the coherence or logic that governs them does not match the reality of the world or situation we find ourselves in. Jean Piaget (1954, 1969) talks about these kinds of moments being examples of “disequilibrium” or when an individual’s schema does not adequately fit a certain situation. For instance, a child may have the schema that birds are animals that fly, so when they encounter something else that flies (a bat, butterfly, plane, or Superman), they call it a bird. Piaget argued that disequilibrium necessitated “adaptation,” or the process through which individuals maintain or make changes to their mental models. Piaget thought there were two basic scenarios that could happen: (1) a child could create a new schema to explain the new stimuli (assimilation) or (2) amend their old schema to make room for the new stimuli (accommodation), which would bring their mental model in equilibrium with the reality of the outside world. This process of adapting schema to fit an ever-changing world shows that knowledge, like posture, is also a dynamic thing that is dependent and relational to an individual's ongoing lived experience.

One of the impetuses of this dissertation is the disequilibrium I experienced when I was a practicing middle school art teacher. It felt like the metaphors or postures I was being coached in or saw demonstrated often did not align with my personal metaphors for teaching. John Dewey, the prominent early American educational scholar, described moments of “disequilibrium” like I was feeling, as “unsettlement” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 326), or a moment when a person perceives that their understanding about something does not match or add up with their reality, leading to a desire to resolve that disturbance. At times we may find ourselves “born into

metaphorical meaning systems” (p. 49) that are not of our choice as Robert Bullough and Andrew Gitlin (2001) claim in *Becoming a Student of Teaching*, which can be an unsettling experience. Metaphorical meaning systems are at the heart of our cultural systems, societies, and the personal ways we act, think, and speak to each other, meaning we constantly are navigating these kinds of spaces. Donella Meadows (2008), an expert in systems theory, similarly contends that the world we live in is made up of a system of hierarchies ranging from macro systems to micro-subsystems. Each system, like metaphor, is embedded with a logical or coherent set of behaviors that strive to maintain certain goals or promote certain values. The higher up the hierarchy, the more power a system has. Meadows further explains that if the goal of one of the larger hierarchical systems is to bring more and more control under one central system, then everything below it will be compelled to conform to that goal. But the inverse is also true. If the subsystems can change what they are doing, these small changes can have impacts going up the chain. The way Meadows describes the world as a complex interwoven system of hierarchies is similar to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of *intersectionality* which describes the way that certain individuals can experience greater social discrimination or disadvantage because of the overlapping and interconnected nature of people’s identities or belonging to social categories based on gender, race, class, or ability. This means that if an individual identifies or fits within multiple categories that are traditionally disadvantaged, they are at risk of experiencing multiple levels of compounded injustices. When combined with Meadow’s hierarchies of systems, these two theories suggest that schools, like our societies, are places where power dynamics intersect, compete, and make these spaces complex.

## ***Purposes of Schools***

Education is often a disputed space, particularly when it comes to determining the purpose of education, which can be diverse. In Joel Spring's (1991) overview of the foundational concepts of education in America, Joel illustrates this point when he claims that schools were expected to instill moral and civic ideas in students and help students learn responsibility, how to develop talents, and freedom of expression on a personal level. However, the educational researcher, John Goodlad (2004) contends, based on a large-scale poll of teachers, parents, and students, that schools are generally thought to fulfill the following purposes: vocational, the preparation for a future career; social, the preparation to participate in a complex society and its various demands; intellectual, the learning of academic skills and general knowledge; and personal, the development of character, personal responsibility, talents, and self-expression (also see Gage, 2009; Brint, 1998; Reese, 2000).

Other educators, like hooks (1994) or Freire (1970/2000), felt that public education should be about addressing social injustices and resolving problems in society by using critical pedagogies. More recently, the psychologists, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek (2016) argue schools should be preparing students for the contemporary world we live in now, whose ever-changing nature necessitates a type of schooling that focuses on developing skills in collaboration, communication, creative thinking, and problem-solving. This is remarkably like the point that Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner made in 1969 when they wrote *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Postman and Weingartner contend that the world is a rapidly changing place that requires an education system that prepares students for this reality. They believe students must be able to identify from the preexisting knowledge and concepts what is useful, what is irrelevant, and what should be replaced, forgotten, or updated to address

the changing circumstances. The ultimate goal is to help students leave the system as people who are “actively inquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, who can face uncertainty and ambiguity without disorientation, who can formulate viable new meanings to meet changes in the environment which threaten individual and mutual survival” (p. 218). At times, it feels as William Reese (2000) points out in “Reconstructing the Common Good in Education,” that schools, and teachers, are panaceas that can cure all sorts of social problems like social disorder, crime, social animosity, and conflicts that arise from racial and class tensions. These claims seem rather idealistic and make me curious as to how schools and teachers are supposed to accomplish such lofty goals all at once.

My feeling of “disequilibrium” or tension in education arises from existing in a space that is tensional or has many forces coexisting, layered over each other, which often fight for dominance. It felt like I was being pulled in many ways at once and each tension was bounded by its own rationality (Simon, 1957), which presented a logical reason for why education should be done this way or that. I am not alone in this. Herbert Kohl, in his book, *I Won't Learn From You* (1994), speaks about his own moment of being at odds with the educational institution he was working in, which led to him adopting the posture of “creative maladjustment” as a way to strike a balance between his ideals for education and the goals or expectations of his administrators. Frank McCourt (2005), in his memoir of teaching public school in New York, recounts a daily battle he had within himself over what kind of pedagogical posture he took as a teacher. The following excerpts show some of these tensions:

They had to recognize I was boss, that I was tough, that I'd take none of their shit  
(p.16)...I didn't call myself anything. I was more than a teacher. And less. In the high school classroom you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a



singer, a low-level scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counselor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, an apologist, a philosopher, a collaborator, a tap dancer, a politician, a therapist, a fool, a traffic cop, a priest, a mother-brother-sister-uncle-aunt, a bookkeeper, a critic, a psychologist, the last straw (p.19)...In the teachers' cafeteria, veterans warned me, "Son, tell'em nothing about yourself" (p.19)...Why do all these English teachers have to do the same old thing? Same old spelling lessons, same old vocabulary lessons, same old shit, excuse the language (p.22)...I argue with myself, "You're telling stories and you're supposed to be teaching." I am teaching. Storytelling is teaching. "Storytelling is a waste of time." I can't help it. I'm not good at lecturing. "You're a fraud. You're cheating our children." They don't seem to think so. "The poor kids don't know" (p.26)...I thought teaching was a simple matter of telling the class what you knew and then testing them and giving them grades" (p.41).

Throughout his memoir, McCourt returns to the phrase "*mea culpa*" meaning, "I am guilty" (Mccourt, 2005), which I think comes from him feeling like he could never completely satisfy the desire of everyone when it came to what "good" teaching should be like.

### ***Metaphors and Teaching***

I now come back to the metaphors that shape us as teachers. Alison Cook-Sather (2003) in "Movements of Mind: The Matrix, Metaphors, and Re-imagining Education," makes a similar claim to Lakoff and Johnson's claim that metaphors are the central mechanisms that "govern our ways of perceiving, naming, and acting in the world. Whether we are aware or not" (p. 946). In this regard, Anna Sfard (1998) is not wrong when she calls metaphors the "primary source of all our concepts" (p. 4). Sfard goes on to state,

Indeed, metaphors are the most primitive, most elusive, and yet amazingly informative objects of analysis. Their special power stems from the fact that they often cross the borders between the spontaneous and the scientific, between the intuitive and the formal. Conveyed through language from one domain to another, they enable conceptual osmosis between everyday and scientific discourses, letting our primary intuition shape scientific ideas and the formal conceptions feed back into the intuition (p. 4).

When we put this in the context of education, we might say that metaphors are the primary sources for how we perceive, name, and act as teachers. Indeed, Rodney Earle, a professor of teacher education in the article, “Teacher Imagery and Metaphors: Windows to Teaching and Learning” (1995), says that teachers rely on mental imagery, metaphors, plans, or other imagery to rehearse, envision, and establish expectations of who they will be as teachers. Earle argues that metaphors bring concreteness to ideas that are abstract (our ideas, concepts, or philosophies of teaching) and help us make meaning of human experience. Earle poses a provocative question for us to consider: “If teachers consider themselves as nurturers, coaches, cheerleaders, mold-breakers, entertainers, preachers, bridge-builders, or subject matter experts, what are the implications of these different viewpoints or images?” (p. 53). Likewise Cook-Sather (2006) makes her own lists of metaphors for teaching and education, a few of which I share here: “education is banking” (p. 157), “a teacher is a sculptor” (p. 159), “a teacher is a gardener” (p. 161), and “teaching is improvisational dance” (p. 163). Every identity or metaphor that Earle or Cook-Sather lists is attached to a certain way of thinking that has its own coherence or logic for why a teacher would behave in a certain way. We can all probably imagine times when a teacher might need to take one of those postures for the sake of helping their students. Earle makes a profound observation: “The caveat is that a single metaphor is unable to capture all the nuances,

intricacies, and complexities of human interactions and experiences” (p. 54). This statement encapsulates one of the premises of my dissertation: the dynamic nature of the educational landscape has many relational tensions (student-teacher, teacher-administrator, teacher-parents, schools-public, schools-lawmakers) which makes teaching perplexing at times and calls for a variety of different metaphors or postures to be taken by teachers.

### ***Metaphors as Active Agents***

If there is one thing we ought to understand about metaphors, it is that they are active agents in shaping the world via shaping our thoughts, actions, and words. To return to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), they argue that the metaphors we use daily “may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make the experience coherent. In this sense, metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies” (p. 132). Lakoff and Johnson advise that it is the perceptions and influences that come with a metaphor that are the essential things to pay close attention to, for these are the things that we are less aware of and overlook their influence on us. Lakoff and Johnson further point out that a metaphor is what it is: a way to make meaning by highlighting some things, while hiding others. This implies that there are intentions that may be hidden or biases built into a metaphor which will inherently pass onto those that accept that metaphor. Meadows (2008) outlines three beliefs about systems or models, which also can be applied to metaphors.

1. Everything we think we know about the world is a model. Every word and every language is a model. All maps and statistics, books and databases, equations and computer programs are models. So are the ways I picture the world in my head—my *mental* models. None of these is or ever will be the *real* world.

2. Our models usually have a strong congruence with the world. That is why we are such a successful species in the biosphere. Especially complex and sophisticated are the mental models we develop from direct, intimate experiences of nature, people, and organizations immediately around us.

3. However, conversely, our models fall far short of representing the world fully. That is why we make mistakes and why we are regularly surprised. In our heads, we can keep track of only a few variables at one time, we often draw illogical conclusions from accurate assumptions, or logical conclusions from inaccurate assumptions. Most of us, for instance, are surprised by the amount of growth an exponential process can generate. Few of us can intuit how to damp oscillations in a complex system (pp. 86-87).

These thoughts reiterate a point that I shared earlier, no one model or metaphor can work for every situation or person. The world is diverse, and instead of flattening schooling or teaching down to fit one goal, for example, an economic goal, would be shortsighted because as Robert Kennedy said at the University of Kansas in 1968,

The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile (as cited by Meadows, 2008, p. 139).

If I think back on the purposes of education, every one of those purposes is a metaphor unto itself that tells us one way of thinking about education. Each metaphor usually is tied to some human need (we need to provide for our families, we need to learn to be good social participants

in our societies, we need to develop our ability to think and create, to discuss, and to empathize). To ignore or reject those needs would be harmful to our overall health.

### ***A Choice***

I have come to realize that I have a choice to make as a teacher: I can willingly or unwillingly accept the postures or metaphors that others have for education, or I can become more aware and deliberate in the metaphors I choose to believe in and allow to shape my teaching posture. The choice as to what metaphors or postures I take should be attached to a constant returning to the tensions at play in education. The educational scholars DéSautels and Larochelle (1997/1998) contend that teachers must develop the practices that foster the pedagogical context that is consistent with their ideological belief systems. In other words, there needs to be balance and harmony between the theories and philosophies of education and the practices of teachers. Gert Biesta and Barbara Stengel (2016) further contend that the ability of teachers to find a balance in one's teaching practice and the ability to determine the right posture at any given moment is what they call "educational wisdom" (p. 37). This sort of wisdom comes from years of practice. The problem is the kind of postures that seem needed for certain kinds of learning to occur, like an emergent or relational type of learning, are not necessarily the metaphors that are prevalent in education. It is these kinds of postures that I seek by examining the metaphors regarding the syllabus.

Sometimes the desire to take a new or less understood posture or metaphor is met with resistance, but Cook-Sather (2003) makes a crucial point that no matter the dominant models of schooling, which use metaphors that attempt to contain and control, "We can deliberately choose other ways of thinking, naming, and being" (p. 948). In an article for *The Systems Thinker* journal, Fred Kofman (1992), states, "Language can serve as a medium through which we create

new understandings and new realities as we begin to talk about them. In fact, we don't talk about what we see; *we see only what we can talk about*" (Language of Business section). This is the power of language, the power of metaphors, they shape what we think, talk about, and see. Changing metaphors or creating new ones for teaching may require, as Herbert Kohl learned, some "creative maladjustment," because there is one thing that schools have shown, they can be slow, rigid, and strict at times, but there is still pliability there. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) also make an important claim when they state that, "new metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and, therefore, new realities (p. 236). By looking for new metaphors regarding the syllabus, one may create a new reality that allows for more diverse approaches in learning/teaching to be taken. By reconceptualizing an old metaphor, we may reconceptualize an old world. We might remember what the poet Archibald MacLeish (1985) said in the poem "Hypocrite Auteur," "a world ends when its metaphor has died."

### **The Syllabus as Artistic Material Metaphor**

By making the title of my dissertation a metaphor, I frame my dissertation within this comparison between the worlds of art and education. While metaphors can work both ways, I mostly work from the angle of what the art world can help us understand about how the syllabus as a material works. I chose to take this posture toward the syllabus for a variety of reasons, which is what I will try to illustrate for you here.

### ***Mode of Being or Methodology***

I chose the metaphor, syllabus-as-artistic material, because it allows me to take the postures of an artist in the way I study, relate to, and use the syllabus. What do I mean by this? What are the specific postures I am talking about? As I shared in the introductory chapter, I think of art not merely as the product that an artist makes, but more broadly as a way of being or

engaging, questioning, and looking at the world. I join with the artist Luis Camnitzer, who said that out of the many possible functions and meanings of art, the most significant is “art as a tool for cognition” (Camnitzer, 2020, 4:42), which is similar to what Goldie and Schellekens (2010) say in their book about conceptual art. After discussing the conceptual art movement in some depth, Goldie and Schellekens begin to speak more generally about what art can do, which they argue helps us to appreciate our human experience in a special way:

What is special about art, Savile says, is that: second nature is presented as if it were actual nature. Thus, the spectator is presented with a view of some topic or theme as if already imbued with significance, one which in the case of beautiful art moves him to adjust his ways of thinking about and responding in feeling to that theme as it potentially occurs in real life itself (pp. 132-133).

Goldie and Schellekens, through Savile, seem to suggest that art can afford us a space to figuratively step back from our human-lived experience, which in turn can help us to reflect and have a greater ability to understand and make meaning because we are removed from the immediacy of the lived moment. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962) in his seminal text *Being and Time*, argues that for the most part, people live and experience their everyday lives without spending much time in a reflexive or contemplative state. However, there are times when people are more present or reflective, it is during these moments that Heidegger believes people shift from a way of being he described as “ready-at-hand” to “present-at-hand,” which marks a shift from functioning in a more subconscious or automatic way, to being more present and curious. For me, art has the ability to hold me in a present-at-hand mode, which is more conducive to the kinds of learning that are more open in nature. By paying close attention to things, especially the materiality of things and the things that are mundane or ubiquitous,

artists can see things in new ways that moves them and others to act, think, or feel differently in some way about some aspect of our human experience.

In my own art practice, I have found myself being drawn to the liminal space between man and nature. I like to look for the unintentional marks, spaces, or objects that people create as they navigate the world around them and what these marks might reveal about us as humans. As an example of this, I share a few typologies that I created documenting the intentional and unintentional paths that humans make (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**  
*Typology of Paths #1 & #2*



The image on the left hangs in my bathroom at my house. It shows several images of two kinds of paths: one path is the boardwalk that traverses a marshy meadow next to a lake in the Uintah mountains in Utah. The other paths deviate off the boardwalk towards the lake or take a more direct line instead of the longer arc of the boardwalk. Over the years of staring at this typology of images, I have thought about paths in a variety of ways like the benefits of following a prescribed path, which might make getting from point A to point B faster or prevent us from



stepping in the wet marshy muck, but inherently limits where I could walk. In a more philosophical way, I have thought about the paths that I leave behind me through my actions or the words that I speak. This whole process of me seeing something in the world that seemed significant (the paths), taking the photos, arranging them into a typology, framing it, and then reflecting on my experience as a human being as I view the piece, is the art.

The ability to see something in a “present-at-hand” way is not exclusive to artists but it is one of the things artists seem to do, which is especially important if the thing you are interacting with is steeped in traditions or conventions that dictate how that thing is used or seen. For example, if we think of a typical pencil, it has an eraser on one end, a shaft, and an end that has a graphite end that is sharpened. The design of the pencil is so intuitive that most people pick it up and hold it in a way to use the sharpened end of the pencil to draw or write with. But there is no law saying that is how you use a pencil. You could use the eraser to draw or make marks. You could hold it at a different angle or in your toes. However, there are conventions to holding a pencil—recently, one of my early education students said that we (teachers) needed to teach young children the “proper” way of holding a pencil. When my student made that comment I imagine it was reflective of the way she was raised or conditioned in schools that there is one “proper” way of holding a pencil.

**Genre-Like Materials.** This comment illustrates the way that our thinking and behavior are structured by the culture and society we live in. The designer Donald Norman (2013) once said that “each culture has a set of allowable actions” (p. 128) that dictate what is appropriate or not for each situation. When someone designs or makes something as seemingly mundane as a pencil, they are in fact using models or conventions to determine what kind of actions would be desired and appropriate for that object. These decisions are based on the mental models,

metaphors, or schema that a person has based on their personal experience, society, and culture. Norman further states, “People create mental models of themselves, others, the environment, and the things with which they interact. These are conceptual models formed through experience, training, and instruction. These models serve as guides to help achieve our goals and in understanding the world” (p. 31). This seems so simple, but it can also be more complex because of the word “appropriate.” Who in a culture determines what is appropriate or not? Is it the designer? Or other powerful cultural agents like Teachers, parents, lawmakers, or CEOs of big corporations? Maybe appropriate is determined by an object/person doing what we want to do. There is a similarity between these ideas and what Charles Bazerman (1997), in “The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom,” says regarding genres:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar (p. 19).

Bazerman describes genre in a way that goes beyond what may typically be understood, to be a way to categorize, group, or distinguish similar things together. In Carolyn Miller’s “Genre as Social Action” (1984), genres are described as being something more than “a means of textual classification” (p. 2), but are the mechanisms for social action to occur which actively shape the way readers and writers think and react to a text. Bazerman in the introductory text for, “Genre” (2010), furthers this perspective by claiming that makers of genres invent and are invented by the genres that they write. When a person upholds or complies with the conventions of a genre, or

“genre uptake” as Anne Freedman (1994) defines it, genres become self-reinforcing. There are also times when the constraints and conventions of a genre may lead individuals to resist the dominant narrative and create alternatives, which Dylan Dryer (2016) calls “disruptakes,” or moments when individuals “deliberately create inefficiencies, misfires, and occasions for second-guessing that could thwart automaticity-based uptake enactments” (p. 70). There seems to be similarity between the concepts of “uptake” or “disruptake” and Piaget’s (1954, 1969) concepts of assimilation and accommodation. The designer, Donald Norman (2003), illustrates this point well when he says,

Technology is not neutral. Each Technology has properties—affordances—that make it easier to do some activities, and harder to do others: The easier one gets done, the harder ones neglected. Each has constraints, preconditions, and side effects that impose requirements and changes on the things with which it interacts, be they other technology, people, or human society at large. Finally, each technology poses a mindset, a way of thinking about it and the activities to which it is relevant, a mindset that soon pervades those touched by it, often unwittingly, or unwillingly (p. 243).

When we pick up a pencil, there are not only affordances or limitations designed into the material itself, but there are also conventions of how we are supposed to use the materiality of the pencil. Artists, despite their acclaimed ability to be creative individuals, can also fall into the traps of genre, conventions, and traditions like everyone else. It is easy to compartmentalize our art from other activities, which limits what kinds of things can be considered art. As an artist/teacher, it is easy to look at my teaching practices, educational spaces, and materials of schooling as being non-art things.

Having conventions or traditional techniques for using certain materials is not necessarily a bad thing; they can be extremely helpful because we do not have to rely purely on our own knowledge, but can benefit from the toil and collective wisdom of those who came before us. We don't have to discover all the ways a material like oil paint can be used all on our own. Every painter who used oil paint before us showed us at least one possibility of how that material can be used. The danger arises when these conventions stifle our creativity and imagination and prevent us from realizing that there can be other approaches that have not yet been used or taken.

Another problem arises when we value one posture over others or villainize certain postures. In an article titled "The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled," Peter Elbow (1973) speaks about one example of this in relation to the way that many teachers, after reading Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, would claim that they were critical pedagogues who were liberating their students by applying his ideas to their teaching practices. Elbow argued that many of these teachers were not truly liberating their students, but merely bamboozling themselves and their students by not acknowledging the power inequities that exist in American public schools. Elbow's real issue was with the way that liberated, independent, free-thinking has become valued over being dependent or belonging to a community. He argues that we celebrate freedom and the courage to act on our own, but what about the courage not to be free? Elbow concludes with the following remark, "We are held back from maturity and autonomy by a compulsive refusal to satisfy the less acceptable hunger for participation and merging" (p. 258). Again, the models or values that a person subscribes to will limit and influence the postures they feel they can take in any given situation, but if those metaphors make room for and value multiple perspectives, like autonomy and participation, then that individual can have a more balanced and situationally responsive posture in life.

Perhaps the real issue with conventions or genres, is that it becomes easy to fall into an uninquisitive posture where the material we are using consistently stays “ready-at-hand” (Heidegger, 1962) and we no longer think about it in a more critical way. This can be especially true the more mundane or ubiquitous a practice or material is. The psychologists, Mahzarin Banaji and Earl Hunt, remark, “The real issue, however, is that without promptings from outside of one’s own world there is often no reason to ‘pause to reflect’ and there is every likelihood that the existing tools will affect, if not actually shape the results” (as cited in Small, 1997, p. 7). One way to combat this type of complacency is to occupy what Judith Burton (2016) in her article “Crossings and Displacements: The Artist and the Teacher, Reweaving the Future,” calls “grey areas” where “categories, clichés, and systems of control become optional. Such indeterminacy incites curiosity and idiosyncratic experiments, often to satisfy individual personal inquisitiveness, rather than to respond to the grand ideas of the moment” (p. 919). It is these sorts of liminal or “grey areas” that I see many artists occupying, and I find myself drawn to as well.

One artist who occupies the “grey space” between disciplines is Pablo Helguera. In “Notes Toward a Transpedagogy” (2009), Helguera argues that artmaking does not offer a way to represent the world, “but rather to misrepresent, so that we can discover new questions” (p. 112). We can replace misinterpret with the following: “to misuse” (p. 100), “to abstract” (p. 106), or “aura of ambiguity” (p. 106). Essentially, these terms describe a way of playing in or occupying a space outside of the traditional structures, practices, and institutions that may be attached to one way of thinking. Standing in the in-between or the “tentative locations” (Helguera, 2009, p. 112) that mark the overlap between pedagogy and art can lead to generation of new knowledge. When we stand in between, we bring understanding from both worlds, which

helps us see each side in a new light. By placing the syllabus alongside artistic materials, I have placed myself in a “grey” or liminal space, which I have found to be insightful and generative when it comes to rethinking or coming to know the syllabus in a new way.

### ***Materiality of Artistic Materials***

The next reason I chose to study the syllabus through the syllabus-as-artistic material metaphor was that it enables me to think of the syllabus more like an artistic material, something that can be shaped and played with for the purpose of presenting some view or aspect of our human experience. Let’s begin by looking more into this idea of what artistic materials are like.

The word *material* can be defined in a variety of ways, but when I use it, it is as a substance or thing that has unique characteristics or properties that give it individuality. When I say qualities, I am talking about describing the properties or characteristics of the material: is it hard or soft, flexible or rigid, opaque or transparent, rough or smooth, and so on? Sometimes, I reference these characteristics as being the *materiality*, or simply the unique qualities or features of a specific material. For example, clay’s materiality before being fired is flexible and malleable; its surface can be made smooth or roughened through the use of sculpting tools to create a variety of surfaces, and it is something that adheres to itself or can be pressed together to create three-dimensional forms. The properties or qualities of a material become the defining features that distinguish it from other materials.

Artistic materials then, are any substance or medium that an artist uses to make their art. Traditionally, these materials were considered to be things like clay, paint, graphite, plaster, wood, etc., which are sometimes known as “plastic materials” (Lucero, 2017), because an artist can physically manipulate them. Goldie and Schellekens (2010), reaffirm this belief when they state: “Traditionally, art, as part of our commonsense thinking, has always been understood as

being in a physical medium, with each particular art form employing a physical medium appropriate to it” (p. 18). The features or materiality of a substance will afford or limit how that material behaves or can be used, in other words, they inform or form what an artist can do with that material. For example, watercolor painting relies on using water as the medium to transfer pigments to paper via a brush. The use of water allows a painter to paint relatively quickly compared to oil paints, which dry much slower. Watercolors also tend to be more transparent, making it possible to create depth through layering in a painting. However, these same features, fluidity and transparency, can limit what can be done with watercolors. For example, watercolor, with its fluid nature, is not well suited to paint on vertical surfaces or on materials such as metal, which will not absorb the watercolors. In short, every material has properties that determine what it can and cannot do, making it well-suited for certain uses or applications, while simultaneously being a poor fit for others.

An important aspect of materiality to consider is the way that materials change over time or when placed in a new environment. Consider the way that the materiality of clay changes when it is dried or fired. The clay, without water, is no longer malleable, but hard and rigid. If the surface is scraped, it may flake or be ground to powder instead of holding the marks of the tool like when it is wet. As the clay’s form changes due to the environment, the materiality or the material’s properties change too, which inherently change what an artist can or cannot do with the material. Form, then, is an essential component to determining the materiality of any artistic medium or material.

*Form* is usually understood to be the visible aspect of a thing, but The Oxford English Dictionary also defines form as the “particular character, nature, structure, or constitution of a thing; the particular mode in which a thing exists or manifests itself. in the form of, to take the

form of' (n.d., I.5.a.). If we consider the materiality of water (H<sub>2</sub>O), we can understand the way that form alters the materiality. Water in a gas form, as it exists in the air, has a certain materiality to it that is mostly intangible and cannot be seen by the naked eye, unless it takes a more concrete form in the shape of a cloud, fog, or wisps of steam as we breath on a cold morning. Water in a liquid form is more tangible; it can be touched, seen, and heard, but is still fluid and difficult to hold onto without something to contain it. Water in a solid form, ice, has the most solid and concrete form of all; it can be stood upon and easily felt, hefted, or thrown. Each form changes the materiality, which inherently changes the way it is interacted with, but each form still has an essence or core, like the atomic structure of water, which stays the same no matter the physical form it takes.

Even the absence of form can be a form unto itself. Think about a hole, it still defines something (see Figure 7). In art, this is called “negative space.” The British sculptor, Henry Moore, said, “A hole can have as much shape meaning as a solid mass” (as cited by Tate, n.d.). The form or lack of form of a thing is important because it can alter the way people interact with it or use it, thus shaping the outcomes. Materials, by their natural properties have affordances and limitations, places where they are pliable or resistant, that determine how materials are used, or what they can or cannot do.



**Figure 7**

*Example of Negative Space*



At times, the properties or qualities of a material are not readily made known to an artist. Much like the nature of systems, the behaviors or properties of a material cannot simply be known by looking at a material (Meadows, 2008), but require a more in-depth experience to understand the intricacies of how it works, and where the material is pliable or where it might fall apart. Heidegger (1927/1962) makes a similar claim:

This is the paradoxical nature of equipment, for no matter how long and diligently we stare at its outward appearance, we will never be able to discover anything ready-to-hand about a piece of equipment unless we actually take it up and use it. For example, it is only when we take up a hammer, in order to hammer, that our primordial relationship to the hammer's equipmentality becomes apparent. The act of hammering itself (and the context in which this action occurs) is therefore what uncovers the specific 'manipulability' of the hammer (as cited by Munday, 2009, pp 34-35).

To know a material, an artist must use the material. They push the material, pull it, smash it, roll it, and test the pliability of it as a way of seeing its essence and discovering its affordances and limitations. Every test, every act of play, expands the vocabulary or understanding of that material. Each experiment adds to the artist's knowledge of what that material can or cannot do. The inherent nature of the material manifests itself as it is tested in a variety of circumstances. In this way, there is no end to the vocabulary of a material because it can always be tried in a new circumstance or way. Even trying the material in the same way for years, even a lifetime, is not useless because the fact that someone could feel the same way about a thing for that long says something about the material. This is what artists do; they do not tire of asking what materials can do.

Artists have an ability to hold things in the world in a "present-at-hand" state that Heidegger (1927/1962) spoke of, which means that materials that are mundane, ordinary, overlooked, hidden, forgotten, or seen as garbage might be something of significance that has unrealized qualities. However, it is easy to shift out of present-at-hand mode, requiring a more concerted effort to hold the material at hand in a present-at-hand state, not allowing what arises to pull us into another state. In this way, it is like theory-making. As the artist holds onto a certain material or practice for weeks, months, or years, they produce a rich vocabulary about that thing. In this way, theory is the holding of something and studying it in a variety of moments, revealing new thoughts and understandings in the process. My work for the past few years has been to hold the syllabus in a present-at-hand mode. To theorize on it by testing its pliability as a material. Each gesture I have taken in this dissertation is like cutting a new facet or plane into my understanding of the syllabus as a material. Every gesture is metaphorically like holding an object and twisting it about to peer at each of its edges.

### ***Challenges and Limitations of the Metaphor***

Metaphors at some point fall apart and no longer make sense or parts of the comparison make less sense than others. When I compare the syllabus to an artistic material, there are some issues, one of which is the syllabus is not like a physical material that an artist can bend, fold, or touch in a physical way; it is more abstract in nature. To call the syllabus an artistic material may be especially troublesome and difficult to understand for those who think of art materials in a more traditional sense, which is limited to materials like clay, paint, graphite, plaster, or wood. I understand this view, and it is for this reason that throughout my dissertation I focus on language, definitions, concepts, and metaphors. Like Aviya Kushner (2015), a scholar of Hebrew and English, points out in her text *The Grammar of God*, I have come to see language as being more than mere words or a boring list of grammar or traditions but as “an opening into a way of thinking, a view of the world, a naming of its neighborhoods” (p. 171-172), and as such, allows for people to see “how a group speaks to itself, structures its own thoughts, and defines its world” (p.31-32). Kushner’s remarks suggest that language goes beyond just mere word choice and usage to convey meaning, but are in fact, the mechanisms that we use to construct our understanding of the world and reflect how we think, act, and feel. It is through language that the abstract ideas or materiality of the syllabus is made more concrete and provides a touch point to grasp the ideas relating to teaching, curriculum, and pedagogy. Despite its more abstract nature, the syllabus has properties and qualities that define it as a unique material, which are properties that an artist could use.

When I claim to work through arts-based methodologies informed by my own art practices and those of other conceptual artists, one might be confused when they read my dissertation and wonder, where is the art? Where are the sculptures, the paintings, the

photographs, the recognizable art forms? While there may be some of these more recognizable art forms, I have leaned into a more conceptual arts-based methodology that focuses on the thinking being done and less on the product being made.

There may be even some who question or wonder how I can place the syllabus on the same grounds as an artistic material. I don't see my gesture as being too radical considering the precedence that has been set by conceptual artists or educational scholars like Jorge Lucero, my advisor, who has been arguing for most of his career that teaching and art-making do not have to be separate endeavors from each other. In his article, "For Art's Sake, Stop Making Art" (2017), Lucero claims that the dematerialization of art (see Lippard & Chandler, 1968/1999), removed the necessity of physical or "plastic" materials in art making art, so much so, that some artworks had no physical material at all and purely relied on documentation methods such as photographs or videos to provide evidence of the artwork. Lucero, in that same article, states:

All these modes of working propose that art (even as research method) is predominately a thinking process and needn't require a practitioner to make conventional art in order to claim the identity and license of an artist. Taken to its logical extreme, we can look to artists like Marcel Duchamp (in 1979) or choreographer Merce Cunningham (in 2006) who both—on separate occasions—declared mere breathing as artworks equal to, if not more important than, the physical artworks for which they're celebrated! (p. 201).

For Jorge, the permissions that conceptual art, performance art, time arts, social practice, activist art, text-based art, provide make it possible to see schooling as another artistic material (Lucero, 2017). It is not just the ability to see schooling as a material that Lucero takes from conceptual artists but their "way of being" or "mode of operations" (Lucero, 2011, p. 88), which he argues gives the methods for how teachers can function as artists in spaces like schools.

**The Pedagogical Turn.** Beyond Jorge’s work, I have taken permissions from the artists that loosely can be described as being part of the “pedagogical turn” or what the art educator, Nadine Kalin (2012) and the curator Irit Rogoff (2008) describe as a shift happening in contemporary art towards artists or curators recognizing the pedagogic potential of art, as well as the artistic potential of educational practices and forms. Part of this shift is marked by artists using forms of education like lectures, classes, discussions, knowledge exchanges, and independent artist-led schools (Kalin, 2012). The following art pieces/artists provide some grounds for me to see the syllabus as a creative material. Many of these examples are from Sam Thorne’s book, *School: A Recent History of Self-Organized Art Education* (2017).

**Pedro Reyes**, “People’s United Nations (pUN),” 2013, was a collaborative performance where regular people were invited to assume the roles of UN delegates and then perform a pseudo conference where the participants discussed geopolitical problems like what the United Nations does, but without having to be appointed career diplomats (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

*Pedro Reyes, “People’s United Nations (pUN),” 2013*



**Tania Bruguera**, “Cátedra Arte de Conducta,” 2002–2009, was a performance art piece that centered on using school, a tool that Bruguera argues is often used by politicians or governments, as an instrument of control (Thorne, 2017), as a way to create a free and accessible space where issues could be discussed, and that art could be considered a political tool for activism. The piece was open to the public and embraced the notion that all people have some truth and knowledge to offer each other (see image).

**Figure 9**

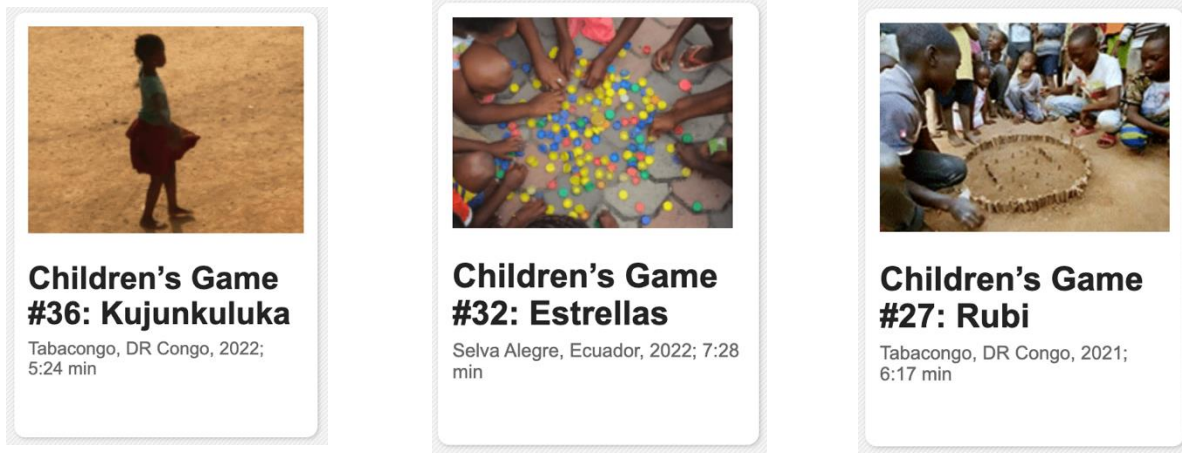
*Tania Bruguera, “Cátedra Arte de Conducta,” 2002–2009,*



**Francis Alÿs**, “Children’s Games,” 1999–Present, is a series of videos documenting the games children play all over the world. Alÿs elevates what is normally overlooked and considers the games children play as being worth looking at, with all their rules, social interactions, and complexity, which effectively makes the viewer reconsider the capabilities and knowledge of children (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

*Francis Alÿs, "Children's Games," 1999–Present*



**Ahmet Ögüt**, "Silent University", 2012–Present, attempts to activate the knowledge of immigrants or refugees who are often overlooked because of their immigration status or their ability to speak the host nation's language. The project attempts to create learning spaces and communities where people can come together and share their knowledge in a way that extends beyond border politics and embraces decolonizing pedagogies (Thorne, 2017) (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

*Ahmet Ögüt, "Silent University", 2012–Present*



**Thomas Hirschhorn**, "Gramsci Monument," 2013, was a site-specific and temporary art installation at the Forest Houses complex in the Bronx, New York, which was created through



community collaboration. The project, in homage to Antonio Gramsci, attempted to create a space for the people by the people, a community space full of democratic energy, where learning and cultural events like art shows, poetry, readings, music, and art workshops could happen (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12**

*Thomas Hirschhorn, "Gramsci Monument," 2013,*



**Sean Dockray**, “The Public School,” 2007–Present, is a community-based school/art project where the hierarchy of power and traditional roles are reversed. Instead of the traditional “gatekeepers” of curriculum, teachers or administrators, deciding what is taught, students were the ones dictating what was to be taught based on their interests and needs, effectively changing the traditional way that principals and teachers controlled the curriculum (Thorne, 2017) (see Figure 13).

**Figure 13**

*Sean Dockray, “The Public School,” 2007–Present,*



**Anton Vidokle**, “Manifesta 6,” 2006; “unitednationsplaza,” 2006–2007; “Night School,” 2008–2009, are all pedagogical art projects that, Vidokle said, attempt to break the master-student model, which he hates (Thorne, 2017). The various projects often utilize educational practices like lectures, readings, or screenings of films, and are dedicated to being a free space where anyone can participate at the level they desire and do not rely on one source as the holder of all knowledge (see image).

**Figure 14**

*Anton Vidokle, "unitednationsplaza," 2006–2007; "Night School," 2008–2009*



By moving towards educational forms, these artists move away from the traditional ideologies that rely on the creation of physical objects, highly valued technical skills of making, and the traditional aesthetics or art ideologies that traditionally dictate what can be considered art (Kalin, 2012). Kristina Podesva (2007) provides a summary of some basic tenets of these alternative learning spaces:

1. A school structure that operates as a social medium.
2. A dependence on collaborative production.
3. A tendency toward process (versus object) based production.
4. An aleatory or open nature.
5. An ongoing and potentially endless temporality.
6. A free space for learning.
7. A post-hierarchical learning environment where there are no teachers, just coparticipants.
8. A preference for exploratory, experimental, and multi-disciplinary approaches to knowledge production.

9. An awareness of the instrumentalization of the academy.

10. A virtual space for the communication and distribution of ideas (second to last paragraph).

In this sense, the pedagogical turn can be seen as a continuation of what the Dadaists, Fluxists, and conceptual artists were trying to do throughout the twentieth century and even more recently, in the movements of relational aesthetics and social practice (Fisher, 2011; Helguera, 2011; May et al., 2014). Through the dematerialization of art and the rejection of traditional esthetics, these artists make “alternative learning spaces” (May, et al., 2014, p. 165) in which artists and curators can resist the “excessively technocratic exercises and forms of standardization that have become customary in higher education” (Graham, 2010, p. 126). These spaces provide a safe place to “speculate, expand, and reflect without the demand of proven results” (Rogoff, 2008). The open-ended nature of many of these educational art projects (May, et al., 2014) allows for knowledge production to take many forms and fulfill various purposes that extend beyond economics (Kalin, 2012).

Nadine Kalin (2012) in her article “(de)Fending Art Education Through the Pedagogical Turn,” stated that she hoped the pedagogical turn would “arouse art education from apathy [and] neutrality,” “make more visible what is assumed,” “reveal the invisible institutional systems in place,” and “reactivate the institution of education as a site of critique” (p 52). In other words, she hopes that the pedagogical turn can be a catalyst to change the education system. James Rolling (2020), president of the National Art Education Association, reminds us that systems “resist change” (p. 4) and “every system produces structures and behaviors to perpetuate itself...the more things remain as they are, the more they remain the same” (p. 2). Rolling is speaking about schools, teaching practices, and educational policies that are meant to maintain

power and the status quo when he references self-perpetuating systems that resist change. It is for this exact reason that a “posture” of a conceptual artist is so valuable; it can allow educators a way to practice “creative maladjustment” (Kohl, 1994), to play with and examine the resistant institutions of schools as material, resulting in an institutional literacy that enables them to work within institutions to embrace what, Rolling (2020) argues, art has always been about—making beautiful forms, communicating life-affirming personal and cultural information, asking questions, instigating urgent transformations, expressing, asking questions that lead to new social innovation, and embracing a set of diverse practices that produce a wide spectrum of outcomes that cause us to be more human and communal (p. 4). Seeing the syllabus as an art material is me making a *turn* of my own, a turn towards the conceptual practices of artists; Irit Rogoff (2008) defines a turn as a turning “*away* from something” or a turn “*towards* or *around* something and it is we who are in movement, rather than it” (p. 8). My turn towards the syllabus is about me, as a teacher, trying to come to terms with what it means to be a teacher and make room for new teaching postures to be taken.

### ***A Return to Metaphor***

In conclusion, let’s return one more time to the title, *Syllabus as Artistic Material*. When I first wrote that title, I didn’t fully grasp that I had used a metaphor. I merely wrote the title because it seemed to illustrate the way I had been trying to think about the syllabus like an artist would. However, there is a deeper reason why I continue to use the syllabus-as-artistic material metaphor for the title of my dissertation; Metaphors, which carry meaning from one world to another, help resolve or navigate one of the paradoxes of our human experience, which Kevin Gotkin, an artist and disability activist, explains well in the film, *The Rupture Sometimes* (2012), he said, “The paradox about experience is that it’s something completely our own and yet

something we must share with others” (2:44). Hearing those words brought to mind an experience from my childhood, when my dad, very seriously, looked me in the eyes and said, “Kaleb, the world doesn’t revolve around you.” I sat there for a moment and considered what he said, then responded, “Actually, Dad, the world does revolve around me because I can only see the world through my eyes.” I was probably missing his point (be more thoughtful of others), but I was serious in thinking about that idea in a philosophical way, despite being just a child.

There is a philosophical word for this, *solipsism*, which means excessive self-centeredness or selfishness but can also refer to isolation or solitude. I cannot recall the exact behavior or things I said that led my dad to say, “The world doesn’t revolve around you.” However, I am fairly certain it was probably something along the lines listed above—being selfish and lacking consideration for others’ feelings. There is a more philosophical way of defining *solipsism*: “The theory or belief that one’s own self or consciousness is all that exists (more fully metaphysical solipsism) or all that can be known (more fully epistemological solipsism)” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). The term *Solipsism* originates from the Latin words *solus* (alone) and *ipse* (self), which speaks to the way that human experience happens on an individual level for each person. I often feel a profound sense of loneliness when I think about the fact that I will never be able to fully know what someone else is feeling, thinking, or seeing, what their human experience is like. I can hear others’ perspectives, but those are still filtered through my subjective understanding. When individuals believe their perspective is the only perspective that exists or at least the only perspective they can know, they are more likely to align their behavior to that belief, thus acting in a more self-centered manner. It seems the first definition, which connotes extreme selfishness, self-absorption, or disregard for others’ perspectives, is a natural symptom of the second, being isolated in one’s experience.

The antithesis of solipsism is, *sonder* or the “realization that each random passerby is the main character of their own story, in which you are just an extra in the background” (Koenig, 2012, p. x). I discovered the term *sonder* in John Koenig’s (2012) *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, which was Koenig’s attempt to provide new words for emotions he experienced but had no words to adequately describe. Instead of feeling like one’s own self or consciousness is all that can be known, *sonder* is the profound feeling that everyone on this earth is living a complex life of their own, despite one’s personal lack of awareness or inability to see their lives play out. The feeling of *sonder* is a logical outcome of realizing that if I am having a complex and dynamic life full of emotions, hardships, ups, and downs, then others are probably having a similar experience. This leads me to conclude that when the famous art critic John Ruskin (1885) claimed, “The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way” (p. 286), he was missing something. Maybe he should have then said: “But, the greatest thing a person could also do is listen to someone else tell their perspective in a receptive, tolerant, and generous way.” In this way, a person can both hear how others see the world and share their own wisdom that comes from their unique experiences, thus enlarging the collective understanding of what it means to be a human.

Metaphors embody that duality of speaking/listening. They allow me to share meaning across the boundaries that exist between my world and yours. In the preface for *Education as Translation* (2006), Alison Cook-Sather quotes E. M. Forster, who said, “Only connect...” (p. vii) and then proceeds to say:

The call to connect assumes and acknowledges that there are spaces, gaps, distances between. The spaces between words and how we negotiate them, the gaps in understanding and how we bridge them, the distances between people and how we span

them—these are among the most basic concerns of human beings in general and of educators in particular. Underlying the prevailing social arrangements and established educational practices in United States is the belief that connections can be established and then permanently fixed—between a word and an idea, within a mind or a heart, in a role or relationship, through a formal process or an institution. It is this belief that I challenge in this book. (p. vii).

With the metaphor of “education as translation,” Cook-Sather resists the idea of education as being “fixed,” but instead imagines education as an “unending process of change in which we strive to connect, temporarily succeed or fail, and then seek to establish new connections” (p. vii). Likewise, looking at the syllabus in a metaphoric way that compares it to an artistic material creates a new liminal space where we can understand the syllabus both as it is and what it could be.

One of the main goals of this dissertation is to create a dialog about the often-overlooked material, the syllabus. The syllabus-as-artistic material is meaningful to me because it provides a language and model that enables me to touch things that are untouchable or difficult to see about teaching because they exist only as thoughts. Through language and metaphors, thoughts are given a space where they can be felt, seen, and questioned. Once again, I cite the work of Cook-Sather (2003) who said, “Every metaphor assumes or generates a lexicon, a vocabulary, a way of naming with the conceptual framework of the metaphor, which embodies and reflects underlying cultural values, and which has the potential—if taken as totalizing—to eclipse other ways of thinking and behaving” (p. 34). That is the power of metaphors and why I have called the syllabus a proxy, because it allows us to touch and see through the syllabus to reveal much about our field's practices, ideologies, and postures as teachers; as a proxy or metaphor, it can allow us



an avenue to unearth complacencies about the curriculum (what is worth knowing) and reestablish possibly lost beliefs about pedagogy (the relationality of education). With that said, now let us move forward to considering the materiality of the syllabus.

### Chapter 3: Materiality of the Syllabus

Before the American Artist, Richard Serra, made his infamous *Titled Arc* (1981), a public installation consisting of a 120-foot long, 12-foot high wall of steel that was placed in the Foley Federal Plaza in Manhattan (see Figure 15) or *Band* (2006), another large-scale steel sculpture made of giant slabs of steel bent into ellipses and arcs (see image), which the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) called, Serra's "magnum opus" because it showed "the fullest expression of the formal vocabulary proffered by his monumental steel arcs and torqued ellipses of the 1980s and 1990s" (Para. 1), Serra had to understand the materiality of his medium; he needed to know how steel could be folded, bent, and shaped in ways that others did not think were possible.

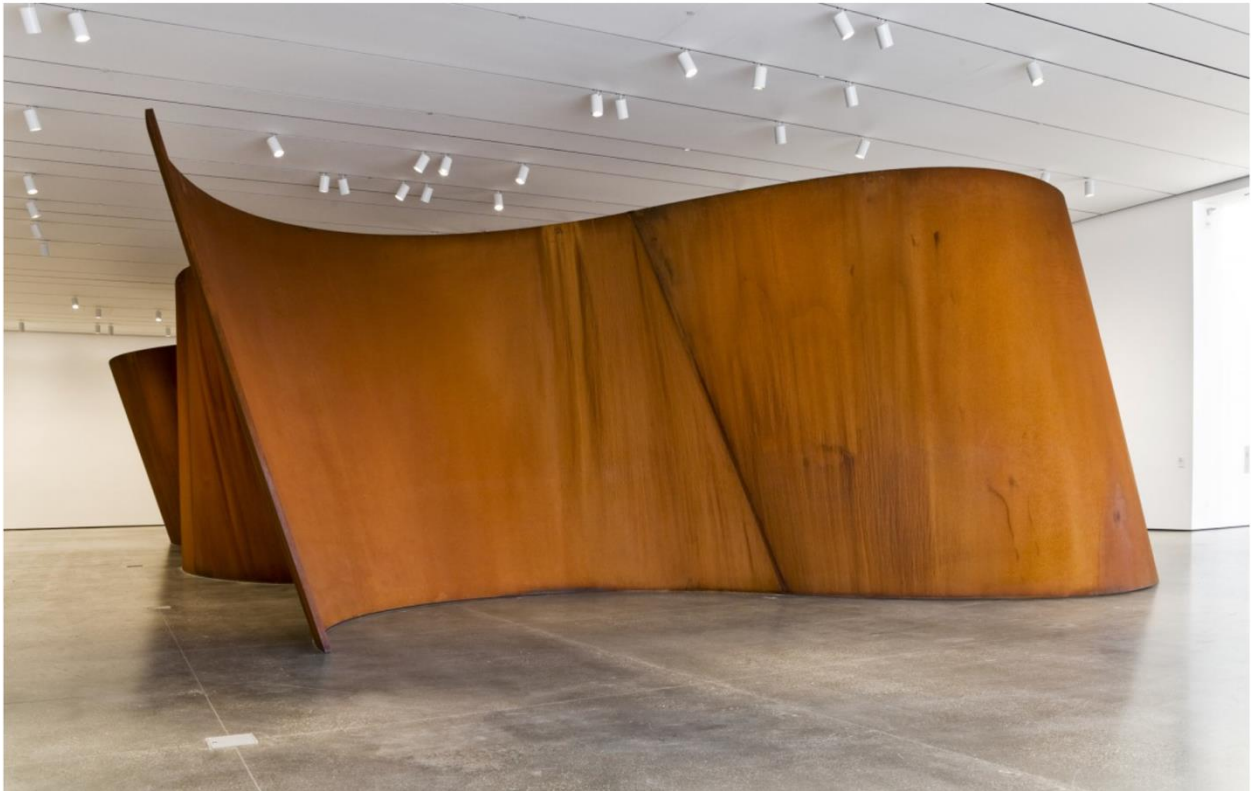
**Figure 15**

*Richard Serra, Titled Arc (1981)*



**Figure 16**

*Richard Serra, Band (2006),*



Sylvaine Hänsel claims, in an article for the *Sculpture Journal* (2018), that Serra’s success with using steel was because of his “intense involvement with the properties and possibilities of the material” (p. 321). Hänsel’s claim is confirmed by Serra himself, who said in an interview with Charlie Rose (2001), that his ability to use steel in the way he did came from his experiences growing up around steel mills and boat yards where he watched massive ships being built from steel that were light enough to float when launched into the ocean. These experiences helped Serra understand some of the inherent properties of steel, like its weight, mass, durability, and how it responds to the forces of gravity via counterbalance and weight load, which would become essential to the success of his future sculptures. Still, there are people who have worked with steel and understand its material properties intimately who did not make the kind of

sculptures that Serra is known for; sculptures that tower above viewers and create organic shapes and spaces that viewers can occupy. So, there must have been something else beyond just a knowledge of a material that enabled Serra to be so inventive with his sculpture.

Serra's willingness to play, invent, imagine, and speculate in new ways allowed him to leverage the materiality of steel beyond what others may have thought possible. In an interview with Eric Davis (2000), Serra says as much:

I think perception is one way that we know the world, and if you can extend your thought and vision through making something and have a dialogue with your vision as you work, it can act as a catalyst for thought. It may turn your head in a new direction and may change how you see what is in front of you" (p. 102).

In that same interview, Serra spoke about the way that drawing, making models, or playing with a material was simply a way of "filtering reality into another form that allows one to rethink one's experiences...Drawing is an activity that helps me see" (p. 65). In the interview with Charlie Rose (2001), Serra said something similar, "You have to suspend judgment and you have to involve yourself in play and not worry about outcomes" (6:42). In the same interview, Serra adds, "It's about what's unforeseen and I think a lot of what art does is teach us to see in unforeseen ways, in new ways" (7:05). One manifestation of these beliefs is Serra's *Verb List* (Serra, 1967), a list of 108 separate actions that Serra came up with to test the materiality of things (see image). Serra created this list after testing the materiality of a bunch of rubber scraps. The list of actions becomes an alphabet or vocabulary of possibilities. Through the act of making and playing with material, Serra redefined the languages of sculpture, art, and the materiality of steel by "extending the vocabulary" (Davis & Serra, 2000, p. 65) beyond the language and paradigms that existed before.

In this brief narrative, there are a few ideas that are crucial and relevant for the work I am doing with the syllabus. First, materials have essential characteristics that make them what they are and dictate what can and cannot be done with a material. Second, having a knowledge of the material's essence and capabilities is essential to successfully use that material. Third, materials often have an associated set of conventions and vocabularies that define what a material is, what it can do, and how to use it. This knowledge is not something to ignore or disregard, because it has been accumulated over years and years of people working with a material, but these knowledges and traditions can sometimes stifle creativity and the emergence of new understandings because they lead us to replicate what has already been discovered. Fourth, the understanding or knowledge of what a material can do comes through working with, playing with, and testing a material in many different settings, over long durations, even years at times. Lastly, one may need to suspend what they or others already know about a material for a time in order to arrive at a new space regarding the possibilities of that material.

Like Serra being given a pile of rubber scraps or the giant sheets of steel, those who consider themselves teachers, like me, have a material—the syllabus—that lies before them. Like steel or any other artistic material, the syllabus has its own conventions, techniques, forms, and vocabularies that have developed over time and have shaped how it is seen, both in terms of what it is and what it can do. While I have some knowledge of its materiality and how it has been used (as a contract or teaching tool), it is something that I have spent relatively limited time or thought with, resulting in a limited vocabulary for describing its possibilities as a material. The intent of this chapter is to spend more time with the syllabus, to extend my vocabulary of the syllabus as a material and discover new insights into this material that expand how it can be used by teachers. I do this by discovering the preexisting vocabulary (how the syllabus been used and

talked about) and then poking at, bending, folding, and shaking this material to see it in a variety of ways and uncover its essence as a material.

Serra's experience parallels my own as a teacher. Like Serra, I have a material—the syllabus—which is a material that I work through and with as a teacher. However, where Serra's materials are physical things (steel, rubber, or paper and pencil), which may lend towards physical actions (bending, tearing, folding) that reveal the materiality of his mediums, the syllabus is more immaterial in nature. While the syllabus does have a physical form, which is important and something that I will look at closer in this chapter and the next, it is mostly something that cannot be tested in a physical way. Where Serra might physically fold, bend, tear, rip, or crush a material to reveal its materiality, I am metaphorically picking up the syllabus to do the same thing, but due to its abstract nature, my actions have to do with things like playing with language, studying the etymological histories of the word, or studying the forms that are associated with syllabi. While different, my mode of operating is similar to Serra's because I am trying to suspend what I already know about the syllabus and look at it from a more reflexive position or in a “present-at-hand” mode, to use Heidegger's (1927/1962) term, to uncover its essence as a material.

This chapter attempts to discover the essence of what makes a syllabus a syllabus. In Phil Patton's (2016) course overview section of his syllabus for a course on Typologies, he writes,

As far back as Aristotle, philosophers have understood that insight comes from analyzing what is the same and what is different in classes of objects...In this class, students will identify an object, a building, or a graphic element, and assemble and evaluate variants of it. By looking at types and type forms (coffee-cup lids, magnetic car ribbons, military unit patches, manhole covers around the world), students will learn to identify what

doesn't change in a design in order to come closer to its essence. A typology might be based on a category of production, a shared designer, or a common material. Aristotle opposed essence with accident—the type is the essence, its variations the accident. Our investigations will look at both aspects (Patton, 2016, p. 13).

I have tried to follow the course that Patton suggests, I chose my object, the syllabus, and attempted to look at all the types of syllabi across time, paying attention to what is common among them (the essence) and the variations among them to better understand how the syllabus as a material, form, or genre has evolved.

### ***Inherent Challenge***

Before I go further, I want to return briefly to a point I made in my introductory chapter, which presents a unique challenge for the work I am doing in this chapter. I have claimed that the syllabus is something that we overlook and has been understudied by the field of education, which might be absurd to some because there is an abundance of literature on the syllabus. For example, when I searched “What is a syllabus” in Google it brought up 1.42 billion results and when that same question was entered into Google Scholar it shrunk to 525,000 results, which is still a staggering amount of literature on the topic. It is easy to find handbooks or guides that instruct how to construct a syllabus, like Michael Woolcock's (2006) “The Fundamentals of Course Construction,” or Peter Robinson's (2009) “Syllabus Design.” There are plenty of articles that define what a syllabus is and how to use it, like Allison Boye's (2015) “How Do I Create an Effective Syllabus?,” or Wagner, et al., (2023) article that claims to know the “Best practices” for syllabus design. However, when looking for scholarship on the history of the syllabus, there is a stark contrast because there is hardly any scholarship on the history and evolution of the syllabus. Seitz (2019), in his article simply titled, “Syllabus,” makes a similar point when he

mentions his own research into the syllabus: “I’m not claiming it doesn’t exist, but my search led almost exclusively to rather obvious tips on how to design a syllabus instead of to scholarly interrogations of its function in various approaches to education” (p.457). It is not just Seitz or me that has stated there is a lack of scholarship theorizing about the syllabus, Bawarshi (2003), a rhetorical genre studies scholar, who described the syllabus as the “master classroom genre” (p. 119) wrote, “It is curious that, as significant a genre as it is, the syllabus has received so little critical attention” (p. 120). This sentiment is echoed by Baecker (1998), Cardozo (2006), Fink (2012), Snyder (2009), Luke, et al (2013), Parkes & Harris (2010), Germano & Nicholls (2020), Thompson (2007), and Eberly et al. (2001). The implication of this means that the majority of the literature that exists on the syllabus is about (re)establishing the conventions or practices of a form that have not been theorized about very much in terms of where it came from, its antecedents, and how those antecedent practices influence what we have today.

This lack of history is concerning because we (those in education) are left only with understanding the syllabus in its current form and being unaware of how it came to be. When something seems to have always been, it is hard to imagine it as something that can change or evolve. In a similar way, it was hard for me as a kid to imagine my parents, or even more so, my grandparents as kids, because from the moment I was born, they were already grown adults. I didn’t get to see them make mistakes as teenagers or what they were like with hair that was full and not grey or white. I would get these small glimpses every time they told me stories, but those seemed like fairy tales. I knew logically they were born small and grew up just like me, but it was hard to make room for that perspective in comparison to the experience immediately in front of me.



Likewise, the syllabus as a thing in education predates me, making it feel as if it has always been there. It is easy to overlook and never consider how it came to be. This is one reason the syllabus seems to be a solid, concretized thing; We have not seen how the syllabus has evolved, changed, and emerged—It just is a syllabus and that’s all it will be. The history and story of the syllabus evolving through circumstance and need are missing, and instead, we just see it as if it has always been. However, like other genres of written text, the syllabus has taken on a variety of definitions and forms over hundreds of years; it has a story.

If you believe, like, McKay and Buffington (2013) and me, that teachers are “powerful change agents” (p. 10) who have significant power within their sphere of influence to make positive changes in the world and if you do not want to unknowingly use a tool without understanding where it came from and what goals it works to bring about, then knowing our history and our stories is critically important. Knowing our history as educators and the history of our practices, tools, etc., is vital to being a responsible and informed educator. For me, it was easy to not pay attention to the syllabus and to think of it as something that was innocuous and mundane, and something I did not have to be accountable for, partly because it just seemed to be a thing that was part of education. However, I am reminded of something Robert Macfarlane said in *Underland* (2019), a text on geography and our earth:

Yes, for many reasons we tend to turn away from what lies beneath. But now more than ever we need to understand the underland. ‘Force yourself to see more flatly,’ orders Georges Perec in *Species of Spaces*. ‘Force yourself to see more deeply,’ I would counter. The underland is vital to the material structures of contemporary existence, as well as to our memories, myths and metaphors. It is a terrain with which we daily reckon and by which we are daily shaped. Yet we are not disciplined to recognize the underland’s

presence in our lives, or to admit its disturbing forms to our imaginations. Our ‘flat perspectives’ feel increasingly inadequate to the deep worlds we inhabit, and to the deep time legacies we are leaving (p. 13).

While Macfarlane’s text is more about the physical geography and geology of the earth, I think he was speaking metaphorically in this section to encourage us to pay attention to the things that lay out of sight, underground, or hidden because these things have more influence on us than we might think. Alison Cook-Sather (2006), the author who wrote about metaphors within education, uses a similar metaphor when she eloquently explains, “When we return to the roots of things, such as words, we find out what human impulse motivated their invention” (p. 30). She further explains that getting at the “roots of our beliefs and practices, in this case, in education” (p. 30) is important because it is through this action that we can uncover the meanings and assumptions that are embedded in our practices. By uncovering meanings and assumptions, we become more aware and start to interrogate them in ways that might “open us to fresh interpretation of old meanings” (p. 30). In going back to the sculptor, Richard Serra, if he only relied on the preexisting vocabulary of sculpture or the typical way steel was used, he would never have been able to do what he did. Likewise, if I want to understand the material of the syllabus beyond what is currently known and make something else possible, then it is vital to dig into the history, assumptions, and conventions that shape the syllabus. The Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999/2012) echoes this idea in *Decolonizing Methodologies*: “To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things” (p. 38). What if there is not a known history or at least one that has not clearly been shared before? We may need to dig deeper to find that history.

I have relied on dictionaries like the Oxford English Dictionary, looking at old syllabi in archives, and various online chat rooms of scholars discussing the word *syllabus* in a linguistics lens (see Liberman, 2010; Harbeck, 2016) to dig up and discover the historical narrative of the syllabus. I share some of these historical examples in this chapter. I have also scoured books, podcasts, articles, and websites for contemporary instances where people reference syllabi. I have tried to embody the counsel of the 20th-century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who believed the best way to understand a word was to study the way it is used or to “look and see” (as cited in Biletzki & Matar, 2002/2021, para. 3.3). Sometimes I have used a speculative imagining to fill in or place myself in various moments to try and understand the systematic structures and behaviors that gave rise to the syllabus practices and form. I have focused on three things: the vocabulary or conceptions surrounding the form of the syllabus, the content of the syllabus, and its purpose and how it functions, which defines the materiality of the syllabus and determines the conventions for what the material can do. I recognize this may be bad historical research, but I am more interested in how those speculations enable me to see the syllabus in a new way.

### ***A Note on Historical Research***

Part of this chapter is informed by historical research methodologies, which is a unique brand of research because it relies on using existing documents, archives, artifacts to recount what happened in the past. Mary Ann Stankiewicz (1997), an art education historian, suggests that historical research can be particularly useful to addressing current issues, but cautions that:

Sound historical inquiry requires thorough, painstaking compilation of facts, critical reading of both primary and secondary sources, careful notetaking, and establishment of chronologies documenting *who* did *what* *where* and *when*. Well-written historical

accounts also require attention to *why*, development of a narrative interpretation of facts that makes them meaningful and explains their significance to readers who are distant from the events recorded” (p. 57).

Getting access to these materials can be challenging, especially if the thing you are studying, like the syllabus, is something mundane that may not have been saved in documented historical research. Studying history in this way can be tricky because we may fall into the traps that Arthur Efland (1995), another art education historian, talks about regarding overlaying our current perspectives over the past, studying the past outside of the context it occurred, and placing motives or agendas onto other people’s actions, whether they were real or not. Good historical research needs to account for the context that led to the event, consider the biases of those who produced primary or secondary documents, and acknowledge one’s own perspectives being used to interpret history. Another danger arises from assuming history is a clean, linear, seamless, or unified narrative. The art historian, James Elkins (2002), in the foreword to his book, *Stories of Art*, explains that art history has typically been portrayed as a “crystal-clear story of art” (p. xi), which focuses mainly on men and European/white artists. However, Elkins suggests that the real evolution of art might be better described as a “tangle of stories of art” (p. xi). Elkins’ experience with art history suggests that the history and the evolution of the syllabus is more winding and non-linear than what can be seen by tracking the usage of the word as it occurs in something like the Oxford English Dictionary.

I am not a trained historian, but as someone who is required to make syllabi, I feel a sense of urgency to know what it is I am making and why, as well as to understand where these ideas came from. In their article “Difficult Forms: Critical Practices of Design and Research” (2009), Ramia Mazé and Johan Redström recount some of the core ideologies that drove the critical

architecture movement in the 1970s: one group, as represented by Manfredo Tafuri, believed that “although political and practical terms might coexist, real ideological alternatives could not exist within a hegemonic system—thus, a truly critical architecture could only follow systemic transformation change” (p. 29). The other side, led by Jorge Silvetti and others, argued against “waiting for the revolution” and “sought the possibility of criticism from within” (p. 29). In a similar way, I do not want to wait around hoping for others to become interested in the syllabus and do the critical work that I am trying to do here, which is to become more aware and responsible for how the syllabus is used. As someone within education and as a Ph.D. candidate, I am well positioned to do this work because I have the space afforded to me to explore in both a theoretical and practical way.

### **The Syllabus Constellation**

Shortly, I will begin to present examples of syllabi that I have found in a variety of contexts that span across hundreds of years. I have debated how to present these to you. I relate with the challenge that James Elkins (2002) argues faces any art historian, which is deciding what stories or perspectives will be included and which we will be omitted, as well as figuring out what form or metaphors one will use to communicate this history. The problem is that there is no one narrative that will accurately capture the whole of the history and each narrative will give a somewhat skewed and incomplete picture. In *Stories of Art*, Elkins provides an array of ways that art historians have told the history of art; many follow the chronological model that Helen Gardner used in her *Gardner’s Art through the Ages* (1926) which begins with cave paintings and progressively works through the various art movements leading up to the modern era. The story follows a singular pathway that mostly focuses on European and American art trends, but occasionally includes works from Asia, Oceania, or the Middle East. Elkins proposes

a variety of alternatives to this “clean story” model, for example, he asks to consider the history of art based on geographic size, language, or a true chronology that gives more representation to art based on actual duration. Each proposal would drastically change the way art is represented and alter the way we think of art history.

To return to my problem, presenting the syllabus in a chronological way seems problematic because it might make it too clean and present it as if this evolution was a seamless endeavor. I thought I could do a survey of all the literature on the syllabus and give more attention to the ideas that are more represented, but that skews the way we define syllabus to the form of syllabus that is most common. What I wanted was to view all different kinds of syllabi side by side, more like a typology, where our current academic syllabus form, which has the most amount of literature and examples, is treated as just another iteration or member of a larger syllabus family. I ask that you think of these examples more like a *constellation* of syllabi. When I think of the idea of constellations, I think about the way the stars look next to each other at night. Each star is positioned alongside the other stars in a flattened way, which requires that I look at them all together, not based on which ones are closest or farther, older or newer. Like the stars, some of the syllabi I share are old and no longer exist, yet the knowledge of them still exists, which is like the way we can still see the light of an extinct star even though it has winked out of existence. Some of the syllabi will be familiar, some are emergent and new. Some come from spaces outside of education, and some come from within education. The key is to remember that no matter how absurd or unrecognizable these examples might be in terms of seeing them as syllabi, at some point someone called them a syllabus, and if we see these examples as a whole, we may gain a better sense of what makes a syllabus a syllabus.

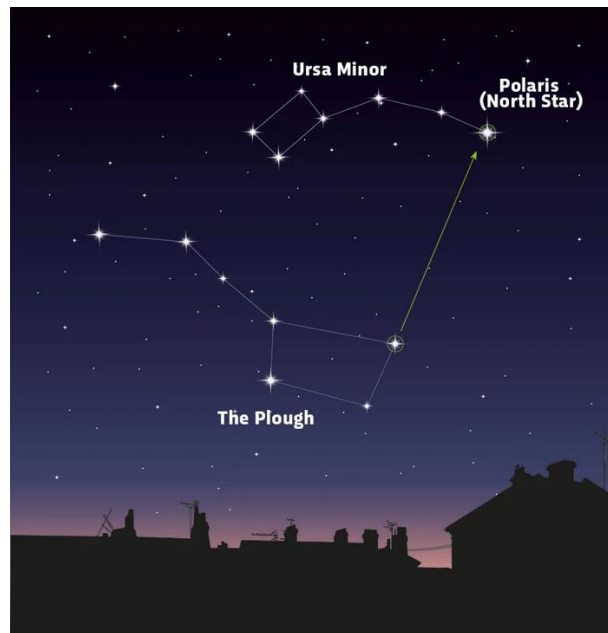
There are times when I present these examples in a chronological way to illustrate the way that genres or forms build on preexisting ideas, meaning to understand one iteration it is helpful to look at what preceded it and what it gave rise to in turn. This might present the narrative as a clean story or might lead us to view these examples in some sort of hierarchy, but it's important to remember that each of them is just another star in the constellation. We'll now take a closer look at these syllabi, both historical and current, looking at the intents, purposes, tensions, or forces that shaped these syllabi to find the essence or what lies at the heart of a syllabus as a material and genre.

### ***The North Star Syllabus***

Despite growing up in the mountains of the western United States and having plenty of opportunities to star gaze, I am bad at identifying constellations. However, there are two constellations I can reliably find, Ursa Major (the Big Dipper) and Ursa Minor (the Little Dipper). One of the interesting facts about the big dipper is the stars that make up the cup of the dipper point to the star that makes the handle of the little dipper (see Figure 17). That star is Polaris or the North Star. I have heard people say that what makes the North Star special is its brightness, however, according to Preston Dyches (2021), a public engagement specialist for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA], what makes Polaris special is its closeness to the earth's celestial pole. Dyches explains that in a 24hr period, Polaris traces a small circle in our sky, making it a reliable way to identify north by locating its position, which is why sailors and other travelers used it to navigate.

**Figure 17**

*Constellations*



I will compare the modern academic syllabus to the North Star, but maybe not for the reason it may seem. I compare it to the North Star because it is something that most of us who have gone through the U.S. education system are familiar with, so it gives a common ground or reference point to work from. It is also the point where many of the newer examples depart from, so again it can be a good starting point.

### ***The Academic Course Syllabus***

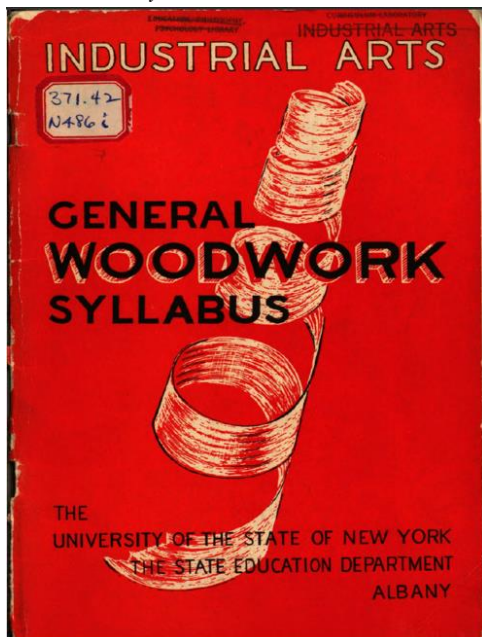
In the inaugural edition of the *Syllabus Journal*, Alexander Sidorkin (2012), one of the editors, asks the following: “How do you know you are seeing a syllabus?” (p. 3). He goes on to answer this question for us: “The outward signs are unmistakable. They all have to explain major objectives, assignments, 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” (p. 3). Sidorkin’s comments offer up one way to define the syllabus: by its form and content.



Along these lines, Jeffrey Snyder (2009), argues in his essay on the history of the syllabus, that it, like other genres of written text, has developed a distinct set of conventions in regard to its form and purpose. According to Snyder, between the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the academic syllabus that we recognize today emerged in education. There were, however, still occasions where the word “syllabus” was used to reference an outline or multiple page curricular guide like the “General Woodwork Syllabus” from the 1950s (see Figure 18), which was an earlier antecedent that will be discussed later in the chapter. Typically, the syllabus was seen as a 1–3 page document that a professor/teacher would make that had distinctive features like: a course title, course information (professor’s name, meeting times, locations, and the professor’s contact), a list of readings sometimes organized into themes, a schedule for those readings and other key assignments or exams as can be seen in W. H. Auden’s (1941) syllabus for an English 135 course and Osofsky and Feldman’s (1970) syllabus on the “Evolution of Female Personality,” among others (see Figure 19).

**Figure 18**

*General Woodwork Syllabus, 1950s*



CONTENTS		PAGE
FOREWORD	.....	5
PREFACE	.....	7
SECTION I. INTRODUCTION		
Definition of industrial arts	.....	11
Origin of industrial arts	.....	11
Objectives of industrial arts	.....	11
Two outlines in this syllabus	.....	12
Adapting this syllabus to local conditions	.....	12
Class and pupil records	.....	13
Time allotment	.....	13
Regents credit	.....	14
SECTION II. 18-WEEK OUTLINE		
Where to use this outline	.....	15
How this outline is arranged	.....	15
How this material may be used	.....	15
SECTION II. Part 1. PROJECTS		
Projects	.....	15
Boatbuilding	.....	15
Carpentry	.....	15
Concrete form construction	.....	16
Furniture construction	.....	16
Pupils interest	.....	16
Model aircraft	.....	16
Patternmaking	.....	17
SECTION II. Part 2. OPERATIONS AND PROCESSES		
Operations and processes	.....	18
Hand operations	.....	18
Machine operations	.....	20
Preparing concrete	.....	22
Constructing model aircraft	.....	22
SECTION II. Part 3. DEMONSTRATIONS AND RELATED LESSON TOPICS		
Distribution of demonstrations and related lesson topics (Table)	.....	23
Demonstrations	.....	24
Hand demonstrations	.....	24
Machine demonstrations	.....	26
Preparing concrete	.....	27
Constructing model aircraft	.....	27
Distribution of related lesson topics (Table)	.....	27
Related lesson topics	.....	27
SECTION III. 36-WEEK OUTLINE		
Where to use this outline	.....	30
How this outline is arranged	.....	30
How this material may be used	.....	30

Figure 19

Examples of Syllabi, including Auden's 1945 syllabus & Osofsky and Feldman's 1970 syllabus

English 155. Fate and the Individual in European Literature: First semester. 2 hours credit. Open to Juniors, seniors, and graduate students who secure written permission from Professor Arno Rader, 2222 Angell Hall. Th. 4-6. 2215 A.H. Instructor N. Auden

**Required Reading**

Dante	The Divine Comedy	Modern Library
Aeschylus or Sophocles	The Agamemnon (translated Louis MacNeice) The Antigone (translated Dudley Pitts or Fitzgerald)	
Horace	Odes	Loeb
Augustine	Confessions	Loeb
Shakespeare	Henry IV, Part 2	
Shakespeare	Othello	
Shakespeare	Hamlet	
Shakespeare	The Tempest	
Ben Jonson	Volpone	
Pascal	Pensées	Everyman
Rilke	Phidre	
Goethe	Marriage of Heaven and Hell	
Kierkegaard	Faust, Part I	Everyman
Baudelaire	Fear and Trembling	Random House
Ibsen	Journal	Borton
Dostoevsky	Pearl Gynt	Everyman
Rimbaud	The Brothers Karamazov	Modern Library
	Uns Saison en Enfer (tr. Schwartz)	New Directions
Henry Adams	Education of Henry Adams	Modern Library
Melville	Moby Dick	Modern Library
Rilke	Journal of My Other Self	Borton
Kafka	The Castle	Knopf
T. S. Eliot	Family Reunion	Harcourt Brace

**Opera Libretti**

Orpheus	(Grove)	Flying Dutchman	(Wagner)
Don Giovanni	(Mozart)	Tristan und Isolde	(Wagner)
The Magic Flute	(Mozart)	Gotterdammerung	(Wagner)
Fidelio	(Beethoven)	Corran	(Bisect)
		Traviata (Verdi)	

**Recommended Critical Reading**

Patterns of Culture	Ruth Benedict
From the South Seas	Margaret Meade
Middleton	Lynn
The Heroic Age	Chadwick
Epic and Romance	L. P. Kor
Fiasco To-day	R. M. S. Crossman
Christianity and Classical Culture	C. N. Cochrane
The Allegory of Love	C. S. Lewis

Vassar College  
English 286c, 1945

**Shakespeare: A Few Important Plays.**

The purpose of this course is the reading of five of Shakespeare's plays selected as illustrative of his growth as a dramatist. It is hoped that the study of these plays will give some training in the imaginative reading of drama, and will introduce the student to the background of Elizabethan drama helpful to a student of conditions in which Shakespeare worked. Finally, the course may serve as a step toward critical appreciation of the dramatic art, enhancing the pleasure of the intelligent person in reading or attending plays.

**Instructions for students:**

**I. Conferences.**  
In order that conferences may be arranged during the term, each student is asked to hand in a copy of her 2 term schedule at the second meeting of the course.

**II. Plays to be read.**  
The reading of these five plays should be finished on or before the dates indicated:

*Love's Labour Lost.* (May 2)  
*As You Like It.* (May 11)  
*Hamlet.* (May 30)  
*Othello.* (June 11)  
*Antony and Cleopatra.* (June 22)

Every student must own a copy of each of these plays. Low-priced copies of individual plays are obtainable in the Yale Shakespeare or in the New Temple Shakespeare. These small volumes are convenient to use, but many students will find that a one-volume edition of Shakespeare's complete works is a better investment. The Bookshop has a few copies of *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (\$1.75). The New Cambridge volume, *Shakespeare: Complete Plays and Poems*, ed. W. A. Nelson and C. Hill (\$5.00), has better type together with excellent notes and introductions. This may be bought at the Bookshop.

The library has of course many different editions of all the plays. Rolfe's edition might prove useful for reference by virtue of its clear and detailed notes; Kittredge's edition sets forth definite editorial and critical views. The New Cambridge Shakespeare, edited in separate volumes by John Dover Wilson, is not yet complete; but Wilson's introductions and notes are of great interest and should be consulted freely.

**III. Oral and written work.**

**A. Oral Work.**  
There will be a chance for all students to experiment informally with oral rendering of scenes from Shakespeare's plays.

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APPENDIX C

COURSE OUTLINE: "THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE PERSONALITY"

**THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE PERSONALITY: HISTORY AND PROSPECTS**

CORNELL UNIVERSITY HD & FS 390 SPRING 1970 Lecture: T TH 1:25-2:15

PROFESSORS JOY OSOFSKY AND HAROLD FELDMAN Discussion Section: To be arranged

**I. STATUS OF WOMEN**

Feb. 3 Introduction to Course: Relative Position of Women in U.S. and Other Countries (Osofsky)

Feb. 5 Legal Status of Women (Seidenberg)

Feb. 10 Socialization and Sex Role Development--Dependence, Achievement and Aggression (Osofsky)

Feb. 12 Marriage (Hacker)

Feb. 17 Biological Differences Between Men and Women (H Osofsky)

**II. HISTORY OF WOMEN**

Feb. 19 History of Women in Modern Europe and the U.S. (Tobias)

Feb. 24 History of Women, Part II (Tobias)

Feb. 26 History of Black Women (Ladner) [Actually given April 16]

Mar. 3 Women's Organizations, Then and Now (Farley)

**III. IMAGE OF WOMEN**

Mar. 5 Women in Utopian Life and Literature (Camhi)

Mar. 10 Future Perspectives in Utopian Literature--Science Fiction (Russ)

Mar. 12 Image of Femaleness in 18th and 19th Century English Literature (Latham)

Mar. 17 Image of Women in Art (Benson)

Mar. 19 Woman as Sex Object--Content Analysis of *Playboy* and *Vogue* (Tobias)

Mar. 24 Sexual Politics in the Novel (Hillett)

Mar. 26 Synthesis (Staff)

**SPRING VACATION**

**IV. FAMILY ROLE**

Apr. 7 Cross-Cultural Analysis of Women (Johnson)

Apr. 9 Comparative Family Structure and Personality Development (Francis)

Apr. 15 Marriage--American Style (Feldman)

Apr. 16 Power Relationships in the Family (Ray)

Apr. 21 Illegitimacy, Prostitution, Divorce and Single Life (Francis)

**COURSE OUTLINE**

English 34E - Contemporary Literature

Spring 1991 Semester

**I. Objectives of the Course**

Through class participation, the close reading of assigned literary works, objective tests, two formal essays (3-5 typed pages), a mid-term examination, and a final examination, the student will be graded on his/her ability:

A. To identify and examine the major themes and styles characteristic of contemporary literature.

B. To recognize and define the various literary-historical backgrounds against which contemporary literature appears.

C. To establish and explore the "timeless" concerns of the literature to be read in the course and how those concerns speak directly to the contemporary reader.

**II. Student Requirements for Completing the Course**

A. Brief quizzes which will precede the discussion of assigned literary works. There are no make-ups for missed quizzes.

B. Several in-class writing assignments. There are no make-ups for these assignments.

C. Two formal essays (3-5 typed pages) to be assigned later. One letter grade will be deducted for each day a paper is late.

D. Mid-term examination composed of factual and essay questions devoted to the literature covered in the first half of the course.

E. A comprehensive final examination composed of factual and essay questions.

F. Satisfactory participation in class discussion, which can only be accomplished if the attendance policy is rigorously observed.

Other syllabi not only had the course information, reading list, and schedule, but had components like a course description, assignment descriptions and instructions, information about exams, policies about grading or attendance, policies regarding diversity and inclusion, resources for students with disability (see Figure 20), land acknowledgment statements that remind students and teachers that they are on native indigenous lands (see Figure 20), rubrics, and tips or guidance for helping students achieve success (Snyder, 2009; Parkes and Harris, 2002; Fink, 2012).

**Figure 20**

*Examples of Policies Found in Syllabi*

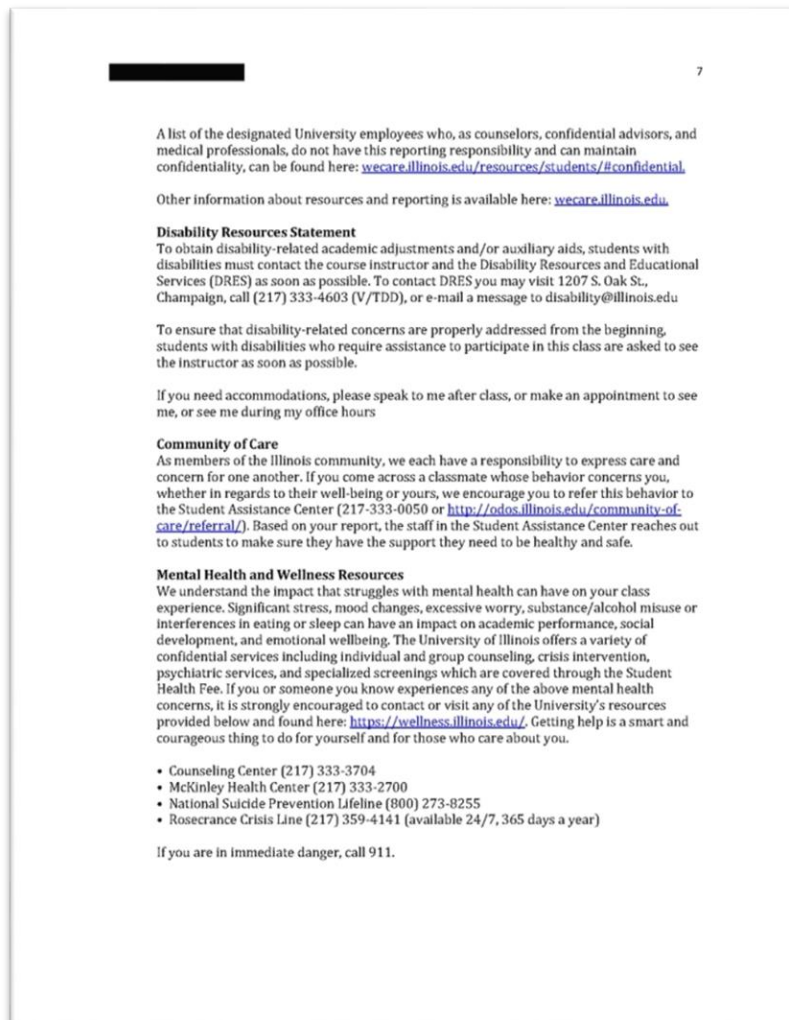


Figure 20 (contin.)

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**Accessibility Statement**  
To obtain accessibility-related academic adjustments and/or auxiliary aids, students with disabilities must contact the course instructor and the Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) as soon as possible. To contact DRES you may visit 1207 S. Oak St., Champaign, call 333-4603 (V/TTY), or e-mail a message to [disability@uiuc.edu](mailto:disability@uiuc.edu).

To insure disability-related concerns are properly addressed from the beginning of the semester, I request that students with disabilities who require assistance to participate in this class contact me as soon as possible to discuss your needs and any concerns you may have. The University of Illinois may be able to provide additional resources to assist you in your studies through the office of Disability Resources and Educational Services(DRES). This office can assist you with disability-related academic adjustments and/or auxiliary aids. Please contact them as soon as possible by visiting the office in person: 1207 S. Oak St., Champaign; visiting the website: <http://disability.illinois.edu>; calling (217) 333-4603 (V/TTY); or via e-mail [disability@illinois.edu](mailto:disability@illinois.edu). NOTE: I do not require a letter from DRES in order to discuss your requested accommodations.

**Land acknowledgement Statement**  
*Adopted by the University of Illinois in 2018*  
More information: [https://chancellor.illinois.edu/land\\_acknowledgement.html](https://chancellor.illinois.edu/land_acknowledgement.html)

*As a land-grant institution, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has a responsibility to acknowledge the historical context in which it exists. In order to remind ourselves and our community, we will begin this event with the following statement. We are currently on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Peankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw Nations. It is necessary for us to acknowledge these Native Nations and for us to work with them as we move forward as an institution. Over the next 150 years, we will be a vibrant community inclusive of all our differences, with Native peoples at the core of our efforts.*

*Land Acknowledgement Statement Suggested by Native American House:  
I/We would like to begin today by recognizing and acknowledging that we are on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Piankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw Nations. These lands were the traditional territory of these Native Nations prior to their forced removal; these lands continue to carry the stories of these Nations and their struggles for survival and identity. As a land-grant institution, the University of Illinois has a particular responsibility to acknowledge the peoples of these lands, as well as the histories of dispossession that have allowed for the growth of this institution for the past 150 years. We are also obligated to reflect on and actively address these histories and the role that this university has played in shaping them. This acknowledgement and the centering of Native peoples is a start as we move forward for the next 150 years.*

**General Resources**

These various components of the syllabus are often broken down into distinct categories or modules of related content based on a theme or topic, which orient and focus student's learning and helps students have a more informed knowledge of what the course experience will be like (Hockensmith, 1988). Maybe the most striking point regarding the form of the syllabus is one that Parkes & Harris (2002) make, which is the way the form of the syllabus stays remarkably the same across disciplines and classes, despite the difference in teaching philosophies of the teacher and the unique natures of the specific classes.

**Syllabus Purpose.** In addition to the content of a syllabus, the physical form of the academic syllabus has developed a set of conventional features. Typically, they range in length from minimal (1–3 pages) to comprehensive (10–20 pages). They are typically printed on a conventional 8.5” x 11” sheet of paper that is often white or are provided as a digital version. Usually they are black and white, have few or no pictures, utilize 1” margins, most likely due to the constraints of typewriters or other printing technologies, and are composed in an outline format that uses separated paragraphs, lists, tables, and bolded headings. There are examples of syllabi in other forms like websites (Crispi and Stivers, 2015), charts or other data visualization methods (Wildenradt, n.d.), or turned into animations, Role Player Video Game manual, newsletters, four-fold booklets, comic books, and YouTube Videos (Jones, 2012a, 2012b), yet these still read as syllabi due to their content.

While the form and content are one way to distinguish and define the syllabus, there is another way, by its purpose or what it does. In the article “The Syllabus as a Communication Document,” Blair Thompson (2007) makes the case that the syllabus functions foremost as a communication device that clarifies the focus of a course by indicating what knowledge will and will not fall within the parameters of the course. Thompson contends that syllabi clearly communicate the roles of teachers and students and demarcate where the power and authority is in the classroom space by the teacher establishing rules, procedures, and desired student behaviors. Jay Parkes and Mary Harris (2002), whose work is commonly cited when discussing what a syllabus is, list three distinct purposes that the syllabus fulfills: (1) the syllabus acts as a contract between the teacher and student to establish roles, responsibilities, and appropriate behaviors; (2) the syllabus functions as a permanent record of what was taught/learned and used in accreditation; (3) the syllabus functions as a pedagogical tool to aid both teachers and

students. However, Susan Fink (2012) argues the list of purposes for a syllabus is more expansive and could also include the following eight items:

a communication mechanism; a planning tool for instructors; a course plan for students; a teaching or pedagogical tool; an artifact for teacher evaluations/record keeping tool; a contract of policies and procedures to be followed; a socialization process for students to the academic environment; and a scholarship opportunity for scholars (p. 2).

Fink argues that the function of a syllabus is determinate on who is using it (i.e., teachers, students, parents, administrators, politicians, accreditation boards, etc.), thus her expanded list reflects the diverse group of people involved in education and their needs. In “The Purpose of a Syllabus” (2010), Parkes and Harris claim that, “a syllabus reflects the instructor’s feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about the subject matters as well as about the students in the class. By making those opinions salient, a syllabus can serve as a guide to the instructor as much as a guide to the class” (p.59). Parkes and Harris’ comment illustrates the way the syllabus not only indicates what curriculum a course will cover, but also reveals and communicates important elements about the teacher’s posture.

The more I studied the syllabus, the more purposes I came across, often in the form of metaphors that illustrate how the syllabus can be used. The following list is a sample of purposes for the syllabus that I have found that go beyond the purposes listed above:

- Syllabus is a promise (Bain, 2004; Warner, 2018; Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- an agreement of roles and responsibilities (Parkes & Harris, 2010),
- a document to signify the care of a teacher (Hockensmith, 1988; Rocha, 2020),
- a legal document (Thompson, 2007),
- a diary (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),

- a map, road map, map of the space of learning (Rumore, 2016; Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- trail of breadcrumbs (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a compass (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a travel guide or itinerary (Hockensmith, 1988; Warner, 2018; Westbury, 2008; Hilton & Ekere Tallie, 2023),
- authority's flag (Baecker, 1998; Germano & Nicholls, 2020;),
- locus of power (Luke, et al., 2013),
- where theory and practice collide (Baecker, 1998),
- a set of rules or policies (German & Nicholls, 2020; Fink 2012; Rubin, 1985; Thompson, 2007; Baecker, 1998),
- curriculum (Rocha, 2020; Shaw, 1977; Robertson, 1971; Alexander 1979; Luke, et al., 2013),
- idealized, imaginary vision of a subject (Germano & Nicholls, 2020; Kalir, 2022),
- a manifesto (Applegate, 2020; Warner, 2018; Heidbrink-Bruno, 2014; Dockray & Forster, 2018; Graziano, et al., 2019; Germano & Nicholls, 2020; Kalir, 2022),
- a machine (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a memo (Rocha, 2020),
- a love letter (Rocha, 2020),
- a model (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a plan (Fink, 2012; Rocha 2020; Germano & Nicholls, 2020; Warner 2018),
- a lesson plan (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a garden (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),

- a narrative (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- timekeeper (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a preamble (Kalir, 2022),
- a personal biography (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a blank canvas (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a primary text (Rocha, 2020, Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a living document (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a set of keys (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a vision of a field (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a set of questions (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a founding document (Heidebrink-Bruno, 2014; Germano & Nicholls, 2020;),
- a point of interaction (Crispi & Stivers, 2015),
- a launching pad or starting point (Rubin, 1985; Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- recipe for a meal/a grocery shopping list (Hilton & Ekere Tallie, 2023),
- assembling a toolbox (Hilton & Ekere Tallie, 2023),
- a stage manager's prompt book (Hilton & Ekere Tallie, 2023),
- an invitation (Carreiro, 2013; Baldus, 2019; Germano & Nicholls, 2020;),
- a first impression (Crispi & Stiver, (2015; Thompson, 2007),
- a theory of teaching (Germano & Nicholls, 2020),
- a locus of intervention (Agate, et al., 2020; Kalin, 2012),
- and an extension of a teacher (Parkes & Harris, 2010; Hockensmith, 1988).

I conclude this rather long list with a final thought from Leon Hilton and Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie (2023), who wrote, “A syllabus is a spacious thing” (p. 14).



### *Concrete and Flexible Material*

Within the literature, and as represented here, there are two general ways that a syllabus is defined: by its outward signs (form and content) and what it does (its purpose). When I consider defining the syllabus based on purpose, it becomes much hazier to me. Peter Doolittle and Robert Siudzinski (2010), two scholars that have written about the syllabus' role in college teaching, make a similar observation: "Despite the almost universal agreement on the need for a syllabus in college courses, what actually constitutes a syllabus—content, format, and function—remains unclear" (p. 30). However, I contend it is not the form that is unclear, but the purposes. When I consider the form and content, the syllabus appears to be a concrete material based on the consistency of its form and content across the variety of academic syllabi that I have seen. While I agree with Sidorkin (2012), who claimed there can be variety in content, particularly in the length and amount of information a syllabus has, most syllabi have a common form and content that identify what a syllabus is, despite the varying courses and teacher postures of the instructors. For example, consider the following syllabi (see Figure 21). Their form is similar despite being from four disparate fields: art, museum theory, library science, and education policy. This suggests that while the syllabus may seem like a concrete material based on the relatively unchanging form and content, it can also be quite flexible when it comes to what it does. This leads to the question about how to define something like the syllabus, should it be defined by what it does or what it looks like? This is something I will return to later in this chapter.

Figure 21

Four examples of syllabi (Education Policy, Museum Theory, Information Science, Art Education).

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
College of Education  
Education Policy, Organization and Leadership  
EPOL 554/EDL 585 College Teaching (online)  
Live Synchronous Sessions on Wednesdays, 7pm-9pm CDT (August 24-October 12, 2022)

Professor  
Curtis Mason: [masonc@illinois.edu](mailto:masonc@illinois.edu)  
329 Education Building  
Office Hours: 10:00-11:30 W and by appointment

**Course Overview:** This course will examine approaches to designing and teaching higher education courses. Within these topics we will specifically discuss effective assessment practices, ways to integrate technology into teaching, and strategies to increase student engagement in the classroom. Outside of pedagogical issues, we will also consider faculty roles and responsibilities.

Throughout this course, two themes will be emphasized: self-reflection and promoting equity through your teaching. First, you will be asked to take the information we are learning and use that to reflect on your past experiences as students and also on your future aspirations as college instructors. Even if you do not have a background in teaching, I am confident that you will be able to connect your classroom experiences to the research on effective teaching. You will also be asked to consider how courses can be constructed to recognize and support differing needs of students in order to promote equity in your teaching practices.

**Course Learning Outcomes:**  
By the end of the course, students will:

- Identify various student- and teacher-centered instructional strategies
- Analyze effectiveness of instructional strategies within the context of differing student needs
- Evaluate teaching technologies for classroom use
- Create formative and summative classroom assessments that align with course objectives
- Reflect on appropriate faculty roles and responsibilities

**Required Readings:** Teach students how to learn: Strategies you can incorporate into any course to improve student metacognition, study skills, and motivation. Stylus. [Available through our library here: [Here](#)]

All other required readings are available as PDFs through the course Canvas site and available through the University Library.

**Assessment Overview:**  
Online Discussion (Seven at 20 points each week—140 points total)

Online discussions allow us to exchange ideas out of class either to continue the discussions we started in class or prime your thinking ahead of our next class. These discussions will range from analyzing articles, applying our class concepts to your own education background, and synthesizing research.

For each of these seven discussions, you will be required to post twice—one post in response to my prompt and another follow discussion to a classmate. Your responses to my prompt are due on

**MUSE 500: Core Problems in Museum Theory and Practice** [CRN 55607]

**Location:** 2078 Natural History Building for weekly in-person class sessions  
Online in Canvas for asynchronous course content

**Schedule:** In-person class Mondays 12:00-12:50 p.m. (noon) CT  
Complete one online learning module each week prior to next Monday class

**Instructor:** Dr. Susan Frankenberg  
E-mail: [sfranken@illinois.edu](mailto:sfranken@illinois.edu)  
Cell phone: 217-222-6373 (text messages only)  
Office Hours: Wednesdays 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. CT via Zoom

This required core course for the Graduate Minor in Museum Studies critically examines historic and current theoretical issues in museum practice. It addresses development of museums within social, cultural, and intellectual contexts; conceptualizations and criticisms of museums as icons, prisms, and institutions; shifting pressures on museums to adopt sociopolitical narratives or external agendas; and curatorial strategies for promoting theoretical stances and responding to multiple constituencies and standards. The course builds on students' personal experiences with, and incorporates their investigations of, museums. Students are expected to have basic knowledge of museum organization and practice and be prepared to study the range of theoretical frameworks adopted in current museum scholarship.

This class is taught in a "flipped" format. Basic course content is provided through weekly assigned readings and online video lectures, lessons, and assessments posted in Canvas. Each weekly module should be started on the scheduled Monday and completed by the following Sunday, but students determine when they will work on module tasks during that week. The once-weekly in-person class sessions consist of workshops, trainings, and collaborative hands-on activities that build on the online content, put concepts and theory into practice, and simulate real-world museum research and work settings. Students are expected to participate fully in both the online and in-person portions of the course.

**Course Goals and Objectives**

The principal goals in this course are to:

- Introduce you to theoretical frameworks within which museum practice may be evaluated.
- Empower you to observe, review, and critique museum work and scholarship from multiple perspectives.
- Challenge you to think as a potential museum professional and museum scholar.
- Improve your skills in literature and online resources use, analytical observation, technical writing, communicating across diverse audiences, and collaborative/cooperative work.

1

**I ILLINOIS**  
School of Information Sciences

**Course Name:** Informal Learning and Pedagogies  
**Course Number:** IS 591 (75745)  
**Semester Year:** Fall 2021  
**Classroom and Class Time:** Online, 5:00-6:55 pm CST  
**Weekly contact hours required:** Course meets 1 time per week for 1 hour and 55 minutes. This syllabus may be obtained in alternative formats upon request. Please contact the instructor.

**Name of instructor:** Bethany Radcliffe  
**Instructor's office address and office hours:** Since I am an adjunct, I do not have an office at the iSchool. Please e-mail me to set up an appointment via phone or via Zoom.  
**Instructor's telephone number and email address:** (717) 368-7091, [bethanyr@illinois.edu](mailto:bethanyr@illinois.edu) (You may contact me via either communication method).

Special thanks to Teaching Assistant Professor, Dr. Martin Wolke for giving me permission to use course assignments, readings and syllabus verbiage to incorporate in my section of IS 591. I am grateful for the collaborative environment that the iSchool promotes.

**Course Description**  
This course will explore informal learning as it occurs in a variety of contexts, including libraries, museums & makerspaces. After a brief review of existing literature on the spectrum of formal, semi-formal & informal learning, students will spend time working on prompts from partner organizations from the local community to reflect on their own learning process, evaluate curricula, develop lesson plans & compare models of assessment that intersect w/social science research methods. Furthermore, the course will draw upon scholarship in fields related to User Experience & Interaction Design. Participants will be taught to make digital & physical mockups for use in areas such as application development, the design of technology learning spaces, workshop models or interactive museum exhibits. Our focus will be less on reading/writing & more on deliverables recognized in related education-oriented fields like multi-media reports, online tutorials & live presentations or instruction.

**Pre- and Co-requisites**  
None

**# Credit hours**  
4

**ARTE 502: Curriculum Development in Art**  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
School of Art + Design  
Fall 2020

**Instructor:** Dr. Sarah Travis, Assistant Professor of Art Education  
**Email:** [sarast@illinois.edu](mailto:sarast@illinois.edu)  
**Office Hours:** by appointment

**Class Meetings:** Wednesdays, 4 PM-6:40 PM, Online  
**Online Platforms:** Zoom, Moodle, and Blackboard

**INTRODUCTION**

Dear Students,  
As we begin this new course, in the midst of a shifting world, I write to tell you about my plans for this course—knowing that each of you will shape the course in your own way. Over the past several months, our world has undergone major changes. The course of our lives has been immensely affected by the conditions of our time. How and what we teach and learn is greatly impacted by all of the factors shaping our lives and times. My goal as the instructor for this course is to enable you to see how context shapes curriculum and to inspire you to develop curriculum that is personal, meaningful, and impactful. As we plot a course, we are also shaped by the course itself: the journey, the course of our lives—and you shape the course, too. I am looking forward to working with you through this course.  
-Sarah Travis

**COURSE OVERVIEW\***

In the UIUC course catalog, ARTE 502 is identified as *Curriculum Development in Art Education*. The course description reads: Analysis of curriculum organization in the visual arts; particular emphasis given to a range of curriculum positions in education and general research related to curriculum design.

In the past, the content of ARTE 502 examined art curriculum and its implementation, mostly, in the K-12 classroom and occasionally in the art museum. Curriculum was—and still is in many institutions—understood as a prescriptive plan of action for delivering knowledge that can be implemented on students with little—other than hypothetical—regard to situational, personal, and systemic variables. Although it is important for us to think critically about how prescribed curriculum is deployed in schools and museums, this course aims to understand curriculum as something that emerges in real time and is vitally dependent on who co-constructs and participates in, during, and around the *course of learning*. More specifically, this course aims to understand how emergent curricula (aka "living" curricula) enter a dialogue with art theory, art and design education, and arts-based research. This course is best suited for students who are interested in how the relational aspects of education intersect with the social contexts of art and design.

Don't be fooled by the fact that you are reading something that looks like a syllabus. We will be making this course up as we go along.

This course can be taught by everyone in it and everything that is examined in relation to this course. Everything includes phenomena, ephemera, readings, events, and memories that precede, are concurrent, and follow this course. In this *course*, we will aim to create an emergent path together. We will traverse a course that is only what it is because you're are traversing the course in the way that you're are traversing it. In addition to "coursing" together, let's keep in mind two other terms closely related to course, the etymological root from where "course" comes from.

Let's think about currency and how it suggests that we can—not only exchange something valuable with each other—but also keep the circulation of that "token" perpetually dynamic, always expanding and shrinking in worth and potential. Let's also reflect on the poetry of the term *current* in order to foreground the often ignored "how" and its ability to run a current through us, keeping us charged (meaning held responsible) and conductive (meaning able to share our energy with those connected to us).

\* This course overview and parts of the proposed course of study description in this course syllabus were written and developed by Jorge Lucero.

## *Historical Examples*

Now that we have described the first example of a syllabus or the first star, let's pivot and examine the examples of the syllabus that predate the modern academic syllabus. As the authors, Macfarlane (2019) and Cook-Sather (2006) both point out, and as I shared earlier in this chapter, things that are hidden, underground, or in the past can often have a great influence on us in the present, despite our lack of awareness. The syllabus form that we have now was inherited—a conglomerate of its other forms, practices, and theories. While many of these examples no longer exist or represent the modern-day view of the syllabus, they are important because they can be considered the “antecedent genres” which Kathleen Jamieson (1975) argued is a well-established genre that helps people make sense of a new situation or to address an emerging need or new context. So, like an extinct star whose light is still shining, these examples continue to shape our thinking and vocabulary of the syllabus through their residual forms and ideas.

One of the first places that I turned to figure out where the word “syllabus” came from and how it has been used over time was the Oxford English Dictionary, which tracks the usage of the word across time. In some ways, these histories can be seen as a genealogy of the syllabus family. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a syllabus as

a concise statement or table of the heads of a discourse, the contents of a treatise, the subjects of a series of lectures, etc.; a compendium, abstract, summary, epitome.

a statement of the subjects covered by a course of instruction or by an examination, in a school, college, etc.; a programme of study.

From these entries, a typology of syllabi emerges, a family of documents or literary devices that generally share common forms as brief lists, summaries, or descriptions of contents. I have highlighted five historical iterations of the syllabus: the title slip, the table of contents, the list of

topics for a lecture, a list of religious beliefs, and a course outline. Each of these historical examples represents a star in the larger syllabus constellation.

**Syllabus as Title Slip.** I begin with the syllabus as title slip, the first and oldest example of the syllabus I could find. The earliest usage of the word “syllabus” in English occurred in 1653, but it was used prior to this in Latin and Greek to mean a title slip or label for books and scrolls. There is some debate about this meaning due to an apparent corrupted reading of the Latin *syllabos* or sometimes *sillabos*, which came from the Greek *sittybas* (*title-slip*) found in Cicero’s letters to Atticus. The following excerpt from Cicero’s letter to Atticus, translated by Evelyn Shuckburgh (1908-1909), clears up any confusion about what Cicero was referring to when he said “sillybi”:

Still, I wish you would send me a couple of your library slaves for Tyrannio to employ as gluers, and in other subordinate work, and tell them to get some fine parchment to make title-pieces, which you Greeks, I think, call "sillybi" (p. 224).

Other translations of Cicero’s letters have slight variations of this same passage, but all of them clearly describe a practice of adhering title slips or tags to manuscripts:

Since Tyrannio has arranged my books, the house seems to have acquired a soul: and your Dionysius and Menophilus were of extraordinary service. Nothing could be more charming than those bookcases of yours now that the books are adorned with title-slips (Shackleton Bailey’s translation of Cicero, 1999, p. 292-3).

In another passage of Cicero’s letter, he again mentions title slips or “sillybi”:

I am very grateful to you for going to see my house so often. Crassipes is swallowing all my traveling money. You say I must go straight to your country house. It seems to me more convenient to go to your town house, and on the next day. It can’t make any

difference to you. But we shall see. Your men have beautified my library by binding the books and affixing title-slips. Please thank them (Shackleton Bailey's translation of Cicero, 1999, p. 284-5).

In Evan Sage's (1936) translation of Titus Livius' (Livy), *The History of Rome*, there is another reference to bits of parchment being affixed to scrolls acting as a title slip or *index*, which Sage explains in the footnote: "The *index* was a tag fastened to the projecting end of the rod on which the roll was wound, containing the title of the work contained in that roll" (p. 56). So according to Sage, "index" and the "sillybi" mentioned in Cicero's letters seem to be the same thing, a tag or label indicating the author and title of the book or scroll. In a later translation of Livy's *History of Rome*, J. C. Yardley (2018) does not use the word "index," but instead says "title tag" (p. 191). So, while there may be different spellings, "sillybi," "silliboi," "syllabos," "sittybas," "syllabus," they all reference a tag or label affixed to books or scrolls to indicate information about the author, title, and contents of the scroll.

This practice of creating title slips or identification tags appears to be even older than this—it has origins in Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew cultures that date as far back as 3100 BC. D.J. Wiseman (1970), an expert on ancient texts and writing, explains that the most common form of writing in Ancient Egypt was done on clay tablets roughly 12 x 18 inches. Due to the size limitation of the tablets, a single literary work could be comprised of many tablets like "The Epic of Gilgamesh," which had twelve tablets, or the astrological omen series (*Enuma Anu Ellil*), which was made up of seventy-one tablets (Wiseman, 1970). To maintain individual works, the set of tablets were stored together in clay or wooden boxes, jars, or baskets and kept in a storage facility or "tablet-house (e.dub.ba)" (p. 36). Each storage container was given a tag with an inscription of the contents of the container to identify and organize the collection of tablets.

While I don't know what those tags were called, they seem to be functionally speaking of the same thing as the "sillybi" that Cicero mentions.

Like all things in life, change happens, and as Wiseman (1970) explains, the use of clay tablets as the preferred material for writing was superseded by other materials like scrolls and eventually books, which would have been easier to make, transport, and contain more information than the clay tablet. As Matthew Nicholls (n.d.) explains in an article for the British Library about ancient libraries, papyrus scrolls became the primary form of writing beginning in 7-6 century BCE, and by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the royal library in Alexandria housed thousands of these scrolls and texts that they were collecting and organizing (Nicholls, n.d.). The apparent challenge of having that many scrolls was to develop an effective organization and tracking system. As a result, a tag or "sillybos" would be attached to the outside. Nicholls speaking about these ancient "sillybos" (see Figure 22) explains:

A library reader approaching a bookshelf, or even rummaging on the lower deck of St Luke's table, would need to be able to identify the contents of the books they found there without having to unroll them all. This fragment shows how this could be done: a parchment ticket is glued to the edge of the papyrus scroll, and would stick out to show the reader what it contained (the Greek word for the ticket is *sillybos*, giving us our word 'syllabus' for the contents of a course). (Section 2, para 8).

The use of the tag or title slip was a convenience that helped preserve the scrolls. These scrolls were also at times stored in boxes or cases called "capsa" (ibotos), which would have a "sillyboi" or a title tag glued or tied to the outside, allowing for the contents to be identified in a quick glance (Nicholls, n.d.; The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, n.d.). While there were changes in the materials

and forms, on a fundamental level, these practices that span hundreds of years seem to be addressing the same problem of storing and finding texts easily and accurately.

**Figure 22**

*Fragment of Bacchylides, with attached "sillybos," 2nd Century CE & Ancient book rolls with title tags "sillybos" extending outside*



When the syllabus was a title slip, it functioned as a way for readers, librarians, or others to distinguish one scroll, or tablet, from another. It provided a frame or distinguishing boundary that made finding a specific scroll easier. It relied on the physical tag that employs language to describe the contents as a communication device. There was an implicit trust between the maker and future user that the tag would accurately describe the contents of the scroll.

**Syllabus as Table of Contents.** The next syllabus form in our constellation is the syllabus as a table of contents. According to Blount's *Glossographia*, an early dictionary published in 1656, the word *syllabus* was used to describe a table or index in a book that was used to show people where information in the text could be found using a system of letters and figures. So, somewhere along the line, the word syllabus made a jump from being a title slip to being a table of contents. In *Architectures of the Book*, Brent Nelson (2022) describes a *table of contents* as a summary of the contents of a book that conceptualizes or announces important topics, starting points, and "significant structural breaks" (para. 1). In other words, the table of contents gives a brief overview of what a book contains by outlining its main points. As such, a reader could get a good idea of the salient points without having to read the full text. This is the exact reason Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE), in his introductory text of *Natural History*, chose to include a table of contents, because he wanted to save readers valuable time by not requiring them to read all 37 books in their entirety in order to know the contents of each book (as cited in Nelson, 2022). The main purpose of the table of contents, like its predecessor, the title slip, was to aid readers in knowing what knowledge was contained in a text; however, instead of its primary goal being to distinguish one scroll from another, the table of contents orients and distinguishes important knowledge within the text itself. The transition from title slip to table of



contents marks an important shift or variation in the syllabus form. But where did this practice come from, and what does a table of contents do?

While I was not able to find a definitive moment when the switch between title slip and table of contents occurred, it is not hard to imagine how the title slip, which commonly had the author's name and the title of the work on it, might evolve to have an accompanying description or summary of the text. In fact, according to Mitchell (2007), many early "sillybi" had an excerpt of the opening words of the text as a way to identify a text, so a table of contents or a description of the contents of a text may have been a logical next step. It also seems plausible that the creation of a table of contents was another way to aid readers and make texts more accessible, which Nicholls (n.d.) argues was the motivation driving the creation of title-slips (sillybi) in the first place. Maybe more than anything else, the emergence of the table of contents was driven by the creation of the "codex," or multiple-page manuscript bound together into a book. With the emergence of the codex around the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (Small, 1997), came a need to help readers navigate multiple-page manuscripts.

As the table of contents evolved, it began to take on its distinctive formal elements centered around a system of organization. Nelson (2022) claims that the table of contents usually utilizes a "navigational superstructure" and as the "term *table* suggests a very particular formal arrangement of information, but as the representation of contents varies in complexity and granularity, so does it in form" (p. para 2). The table of contents is often recognized by its categorial system, sequenced list, or divisions of chapters or headings that guide readers based on the structure and content of the book. The form or organization reflected the important categories, sections, or starting points in the content of the text. The form looked a lot like an outline or list that utilized a system of letters and figures and often worked in tandem with other

navigational devices like tabs and headers (Blount, 1656; Nelson, 2022). The table of contents was often placed at the front of a book, making it one of the first things readers engaged with, and for this reason, Nelson (2022) believes that during the Middle Ages in Europe, study aids became the starting point of study rather than the actual texts. The following examples illustrate some of these early tables of contents, as well as synoptic tree diagrams, which together might be considered some of the ancestors or antecedents of the modern syllabus's distinctive form (see Figure 23).

Figure 23

Examples of early table of contents & synoptic tree diagrams

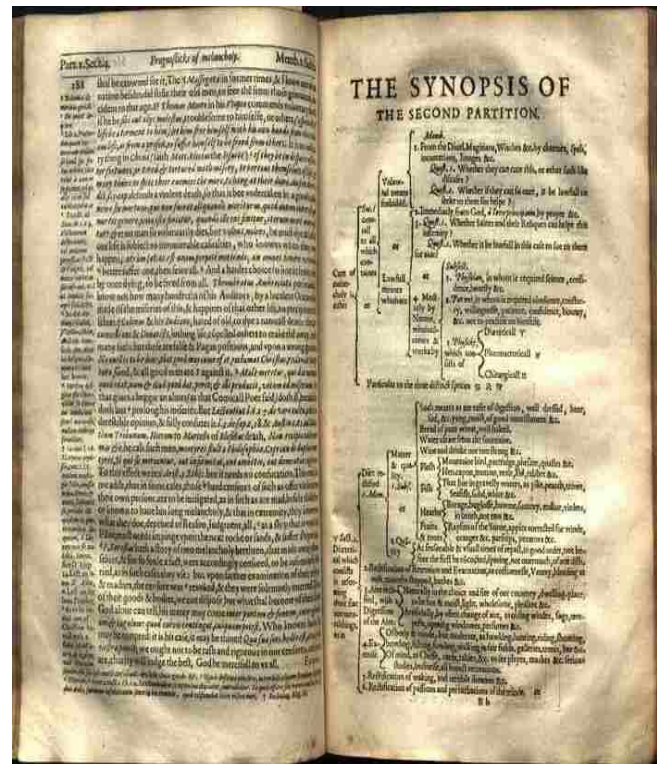
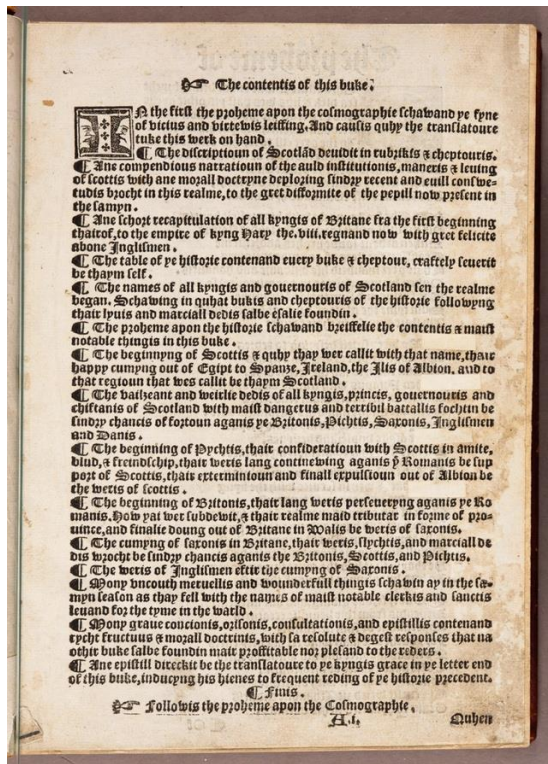
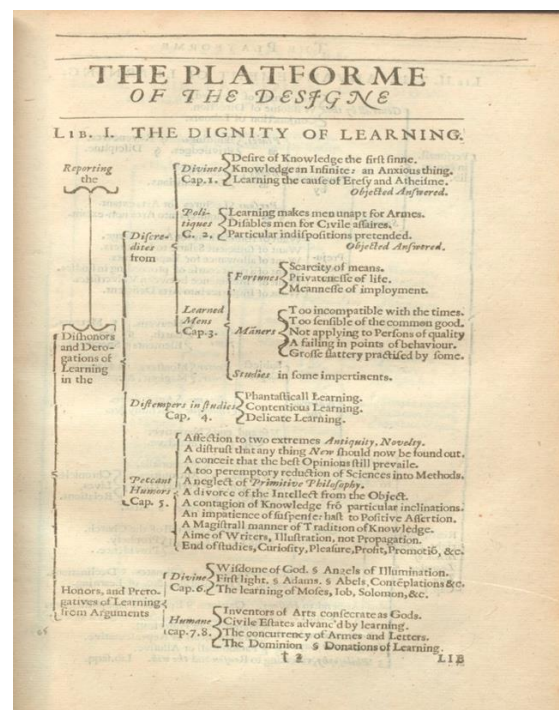
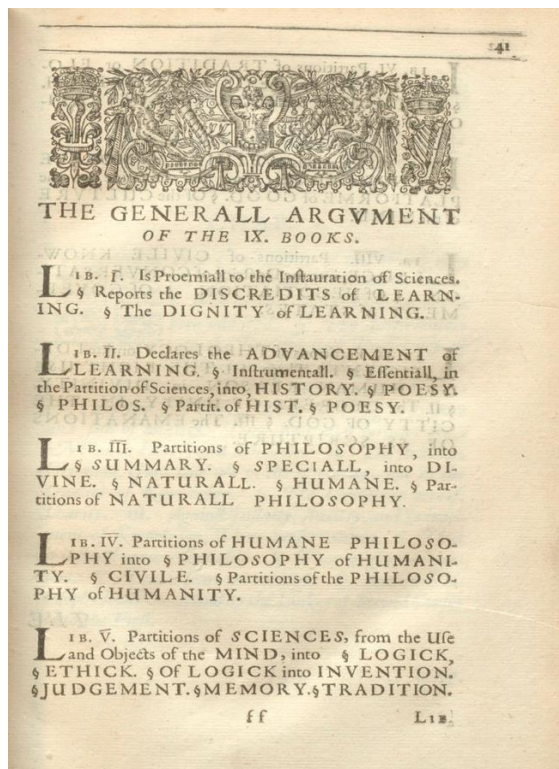


Figure 23 (contin.)



**Syllabus as List of Topics for a Lecture.** The third historical syllabus is a list of topics for a lecture. The syllabus in this iteration is essentially a list of topics or subjects that a speaker would speak on at a lecture or series of lectures. In 1790, Charles Henry Wilkinson produced a syllabus of lectures on anatomy that is divided into topics for various lectures. In Lecture 1, (see Figure 24), Wilkinson lists a variety of topics that generally follow an order or logical sequence of topics, but it would generally still need someone of expert knowledge to explain each point in further detail. The following examples: Hemenway’s (1884) syllabus of lectures on the Bible, Cubberly’s (1902) Syllabus of lectures on the history of education, or Pearson’s (1904) syllabus for an “Illustrated Lecture on the Care of Milk,” that he made for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (see Figure 25), utilize a more formal system of organization to create lists and outlines that are still commonly used in syllabi today.

Figure 24

Wilkinson's syllabus for a lecture

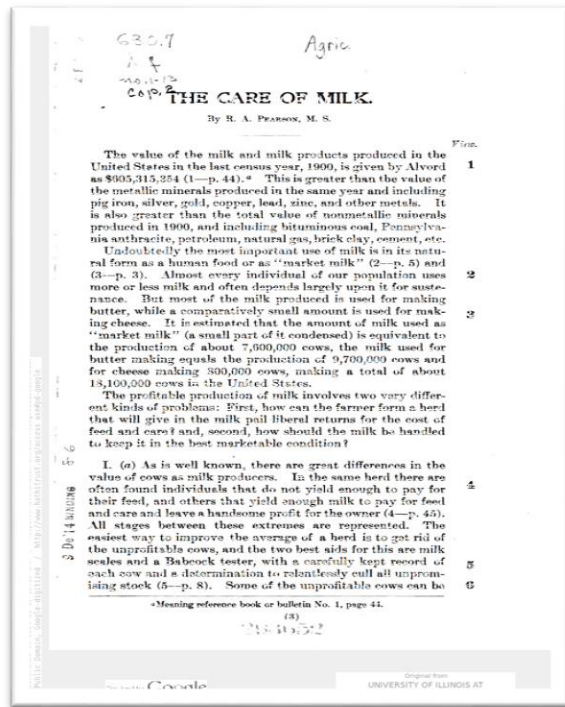
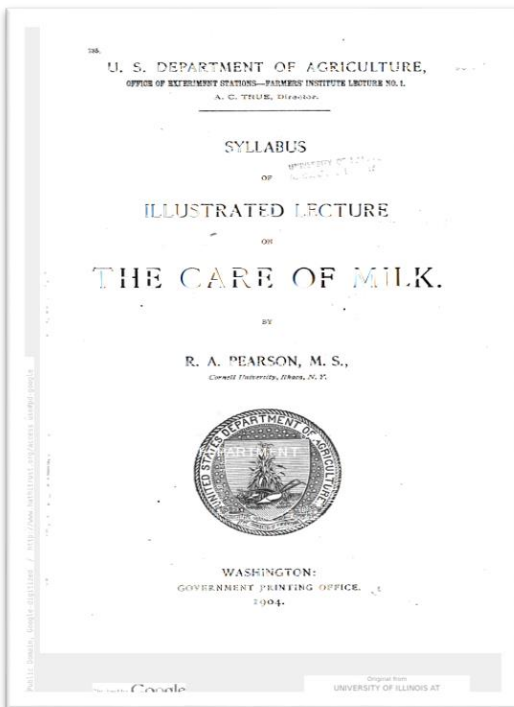
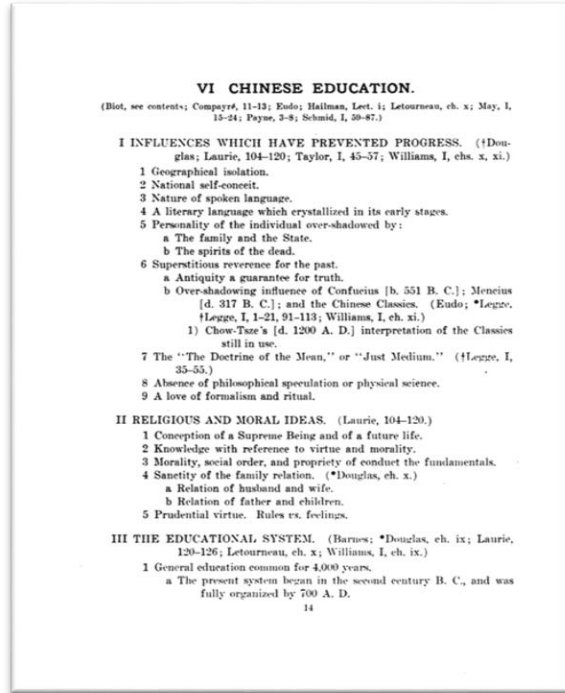
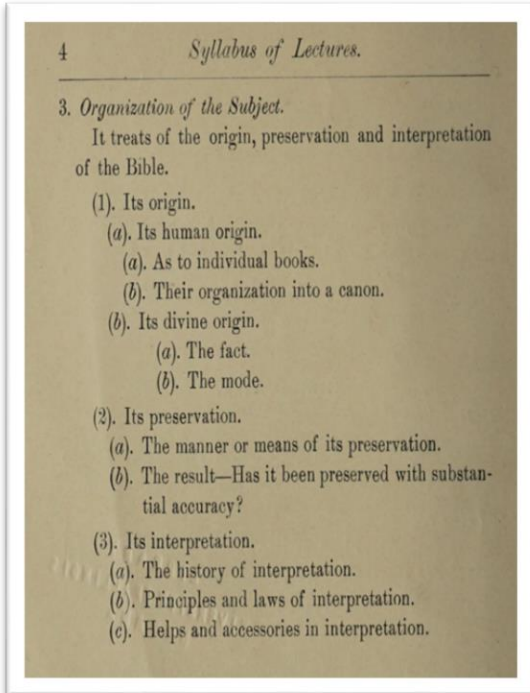
## L E C T U R E I.

**G**ENERAL observations, as introductory to the whole.—History of anatomy; its origin traced from the earliest accounts; practised in some measure by the Egyptians: their method of embalming bodies; superstitious veneration paid to animals hinders its progress; improved by Augurs, or inspectors of animal bodies.—Anatomy first cultivated by the Greeks as a branch of philosophy; as a distinct science by Hippocrates, and prefixed to medicine.—Its progress in the time of Alexander the Great; by whom cultivated in the Alexandrian schools.—Its revolutions to the year 642; progress to the year 1540—Discoveries of Vesalius, Fallopius, Eustachius, and others; circulation of the blood by Harvey 1628—lacteals discovered by Astruc 1627—lymphatics by Rudbeck, Bartholin, &c. 1662—Discoveries of Levenhock, Ruysch, and Malpighius; conclusion to the present time.

General reflections on the complicated structure of man's body.—First, the *anima*, or soul, necessary to be placed in a corporeal substance.—The necessity of the sensitive faculties demonstrated.—Muscles, tendons, ligaments, for what purpose given.—Bones, for what;—joints, their use;—the fat, for what;—skin as a covering for the whole.

Figure 25

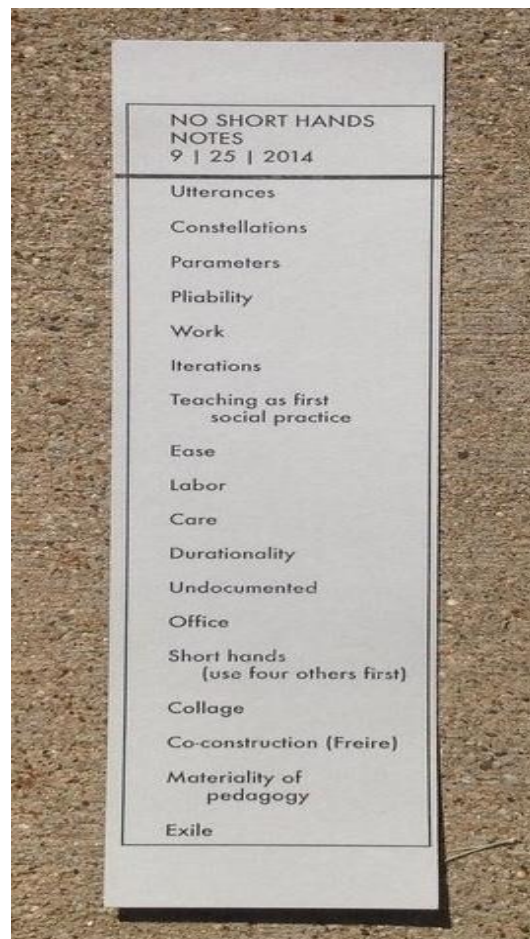
Examples of syllabi for lectures (Hemenway's (1884) syllabus of lectures on the Bible, Cubberly's (1902) Syllabus of lectures on the history of education, or Pearson's (1904) syllabus for an "Illustrated Lecture on the Care of Milk," that he made for the U.S. Department of Agriculture).



This shift again marks a moment of variation, but what led to this variation? While there isn't exact knowledge, I imagine that if someone was going to give a lecture, the people hosting the lecture would probably want to know what it would be about and they might ask the speaker for more information. The speaker would then generate a title and list of things they will speak about, an abstract or proposal which might be similar to this list of topics that Jorge Lucero made for a lecture he gave at Trinity Christian College in 2014 (see Figure 26). The list of topics could then be shared with others to attract listeners to the lecture.

**Figure 26**

*Jorge Lucero's list of topics for lecture*



It may also result because someone gave a lecture that people thought was going to be about one thing and it ended up being another. This happens to me all the time at conferences. I read a title, and it sounds intriguing, but the actual session is quite different, which has been frustrating. It may have been that the attendees of a lecture complained that the title was misleading, and they wanted to know more about what would be spoken about in future events. A scenario like this may have prompted Charles Henry Wilkinson (1790) to write the following introduction to his syllabus of lectures on anatomy: “Mr. Wilkinson thinks it necessary to inform those GENTLEMEN, who honour him with attending his LECTURES, that such scientific terms or phrases as are used in this syllabus, or in the delivery of his lecture, will be explained as they occur” (p. 1). I may be wrong, but the sarcastic tone of this note made me wonder if Wilkinson had experienced complaints about his lectures from stuffy men and that lead him to produce a list of topics to spell out exactly what he would speak on.

One of my favorite mentions of the “syllabus of lectures” comes in Walter Scott’s (1818) *Heart of Mid-Lothian*. Scott lists the “syllabus of lectures” as one of the potential artifacts that one might find in a person’s pocket. There is a certain mundaneness to the syllabus seen this way. Alongside other similar things like a playbill, letters between a student and teacher, and handouts from a debate club, the syllabus was just one more thing a student was likely to encounter in their day-to-day life at a university. So, even in 1818, the syllabus was considered a mundane object.

One of the key shifts that has taken place between the former title slip and table of contents syllabi, is the way the list of topics predicts or proposes what will happen or be spoken about. When the syllabus was first conceived as a summary, abstract, or index for a book, it

functioned as a communicative tool in the past tense. For example, a table of contents is created after a book is written, and the contents are known, which aids readers in assessing what is contained in the book. When the word shifted to be a list of subjects for a lecture, it began to function in a more predictive role or in the future tense. The document no longer indicated what happened, but attempted to predict and control what would come, while also functioning as a communicative tool to aid potential attendees or students in determining if a lecture would be of use, depending on the subjects that were to be covered. The switch from the past tense to the future tense is important and sets a precedence for the increasing tendency to use syllabi to predict and control what will happen.

**Syllabus as List of Religious Beliefs.** Now we move to the syllabus as a list of religious beliefs. In 1864, the Roman Catholic Church, directed by Pope Pius IX published an encyclical, a letter from the pope to all bishops in the Roman Catholic Church, titled, “Quanta Cura: Condemning Current Errors” (p. 2). Accompanying this letter was the “Syllabus of Errors,” a list outlining 80 heretical doctrines or practices that were common to the intellectual movements of the nineteenth century but were considered false and misleading according to the church leadership (see figure 27). This list, given to all bishops, provided references to where each false belief had previously been condemned, and where these bishops could learn more (Newman, 1873). Below is a small sampling of some of these “errors:”

**15.** Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.

**21.** The Church has not the power of dogmatically defining that the religion of the Catholic Church is the only true religion.

**42.** In the case of conflicting laws enacted by the two powers, the civil law prevails.



**55.** The Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church.

**67.** By the law of nature, the marriage tie is not indissoluble, and in many cases divorce properly so called may be decreed by the civil authority.

**77.** In the present day it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship (Pius IX, 1864)

The list was numbered and organized into sub-sections addressing various themes like moderate rationalism, pantheism, naturalism, and absolute rationalism, errors concerning the church and her rights, and errors concerning natural and Christian ethics. The subsequently published list was added to and further supported by Pope Pius X in 1907.

**Figure 27**

*Syllabus of Errors*

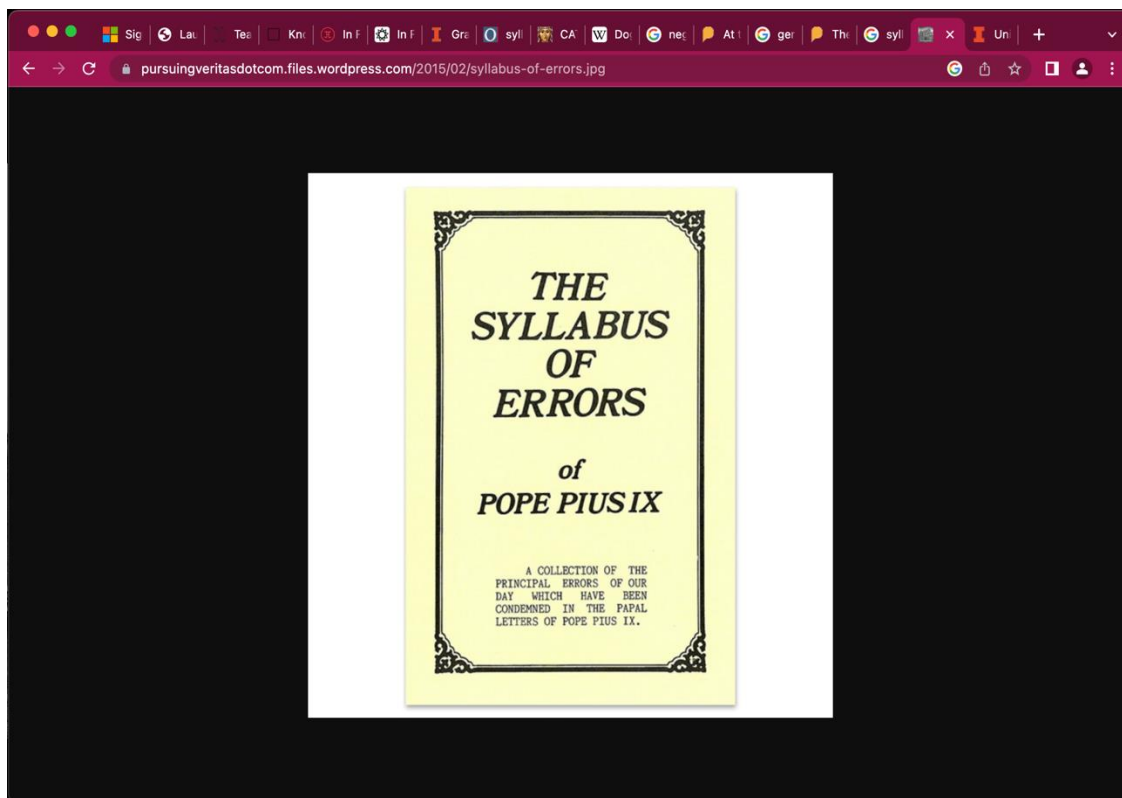
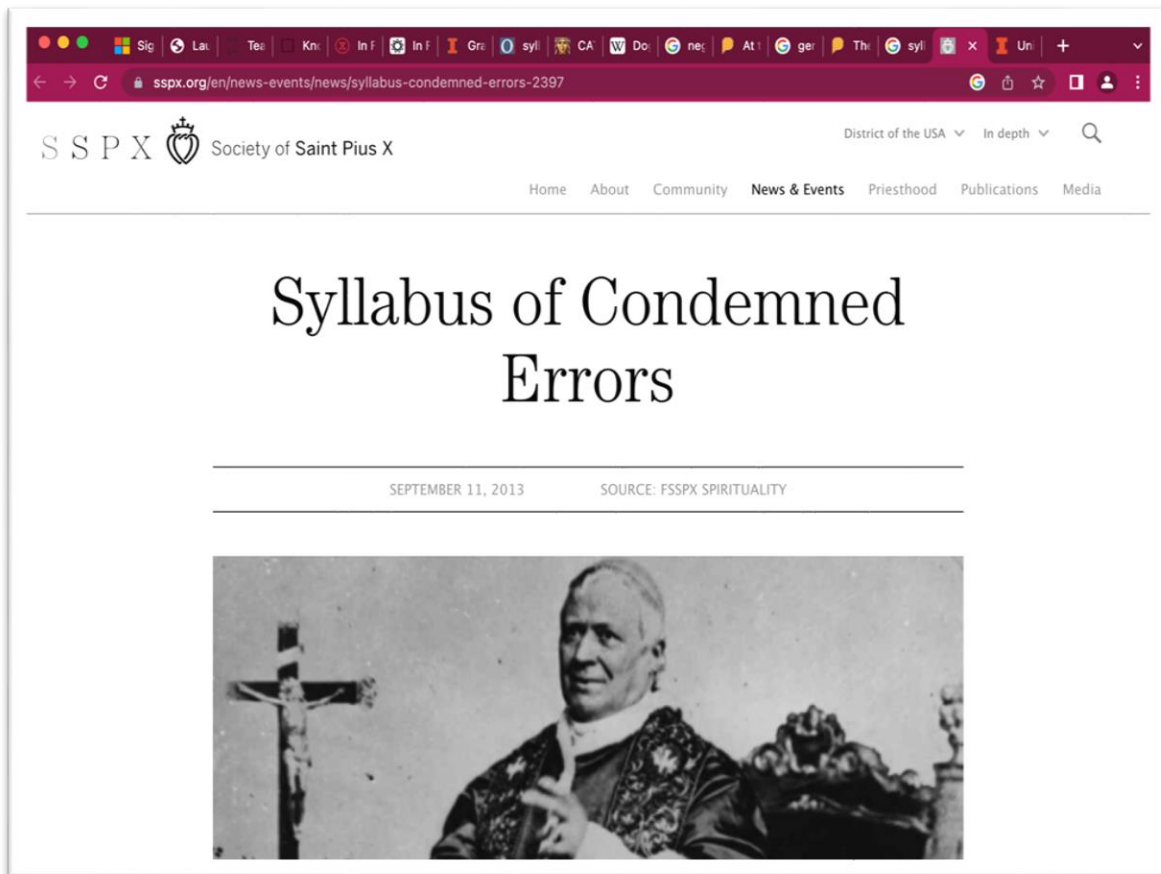


Figure 27 (contin.)



According to Anthony Haag's (1912) entry in the Catholic Encyclopedia, this letter and the accompanying "Syllabus of Errors," were meant to address some of the practices and beliefs common to the political and intellectual movements of the time, which were particularly concerning to Pope Pius IX because they challenged the foundations of human and divine order and questioned the infallibility of the Pope. In Haag's (1912) words,

The Syllabus is not only the defense of the inalienable rights of God, of the Church, and of truth against the abuse of the words freedom and culture on the part of unbridled Liberalism, but it is also a protest, earnest and energetic, against the attempt to

eliminate the influence of the Catholic Church on the life of nations and of individuals, on the family and the school (para 8).

The syllabus did not contain any teachings by the Pope directly, but instead indicated a specific encyclical, allocution, or letter in which these beliefs had already been condemned. This list, sent to bishops, was compiled by a group of other Catholic leadership and was intended to instruct these bishops about which "errors" ought to be rejected by Catholics. While it was meant for bishops, it was also seen and discussed by the public, as evidenced by John Harvey Newman's letter to the Duke of Norfolk in 1874 expressing his concerns about the way some people were using this syllabus like a dogmatic decree that all Romans must accept.

As Francis Sullivan (1996), an American Catholic theologian who writes about interpreting documents of the magisterium, explains, some people thought the "Syllabus of Errors" carried the weight of the Pope, who, according to the Roman Catholic Church, is thought to have divine authority, so in essence, the syllabus had the stamp of the divine on it. Consequently, some people felt this meant that Catholics could not be loyal citizens of a modern state because the Pope and the Roman Church were seen as being infallible and above the government. Essentially, the syllabus became a binding document with papal authority. Samuel Rocha, in his book *The Syllabus as Curriculum* (2020), writes briefly about the "Syllabus of Errors" and describes it similarly, as a "dogmatic decree" (p. 27) which connotes it as being something that was written with divine authority and is unquestioningly true. There is an implied trust between the Pope and his followers that his higher authority and wisdom on the matter meant he could instruct and warn his members to reject these false beliefs. Newman, took issue with this view, and attempted to make a distinction between the expectation to obey and an act of faith:

The syllabus is to be received with profound submission, as having been sent by the Pope's authority to the Bishops of the world...and is to be received from the pope by an act of obedience, not of faith, that obedience being shown by having recourse to the original and authoritative documents (as cited by Sullivan, 1996, p. 143).

Newman says this list of "errors" should not be thought of as a dogmatic document, but should instead be understood as a list, index, or catalog because the syllabus only points out other documents where these false beliefs are already claimed to be false. This might justify why the document is rather bare and lacks any explanation for why these modern beliefs were considered false. Like the way the table of contents or index might indicate where in the text a reader could find a certain topic, or in this case, an explanation for why a belief was false, the "Syllabus of Errors" points a reader outside of the text to where they can find the previously explained reasoning. This might justify the belief that a syllabus is not the actual content, but merely the summary or tool that points to where the real content is.

When I initially came across the "Syllabus of Errors," it felt different from the other syllabus examples, but in closer examination, I found it shares some similarities, including formal aspects, like the numbered list organized into sub-sections according to theme, common to the table of contents. It also directs users toward locating certain knowledge, requiring the reader to do the work to learn for themselves. Like the physical tag to identify scrolls, it relies on the physical publication and dissemination of the list as a way to instruct followers. The Roman Catholic Church leadership may have called this a syllabus because it was simply a list, or maybe they called it a syllabus because it was meant to teach or offer a course of action for Catholic members to follow. Either way, it's an interesting example because it marks a moment when the syllabus was used by a person in authority to instruct, both through the summarized

knowledge in the syllabus itself, pointing to where a learner could learn more, and by introducing an expectation that the subordinates obey or take a certain course of action that is more explicit than prior examples.

**Syllabus as a Course Outline.** The fifth example of historical syllabi is the syllabus as a course outline or program of study. In a brief essay on the history of the syllabus, Jeffrey Snyder (2009) claims that it was around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the syllabus form and definition began to expand to be a course outline for learning that went beyond merely listing some topics like the “History II syllabus” that Harvard professor Henry Adams made in 1870 outlining 298 topics to discuss in his history course (see Figure 28). As the syllabus became established within academia and expanded to be more of an outline, a variety of forms emerged. Hemenway’s (1884) syllabus of lectures on the Bible, Cubberly’s (1902) syllabus of lectures on the history of education, and Brooks’ (1892) syllabus for a course in pedagogy utilize a more formal system of organization that categorizes the topics into sections, themes, and sequences. The syllabus uses numbers and letters to indicate levels of hierarchies and relationships (see Figure 29) and these syllabi were multiple page documents, which some, like Brook’s syllabus, exceeded 60 pages in length.

Figure 28

Henry Adams' "History II syllabus" (1870)

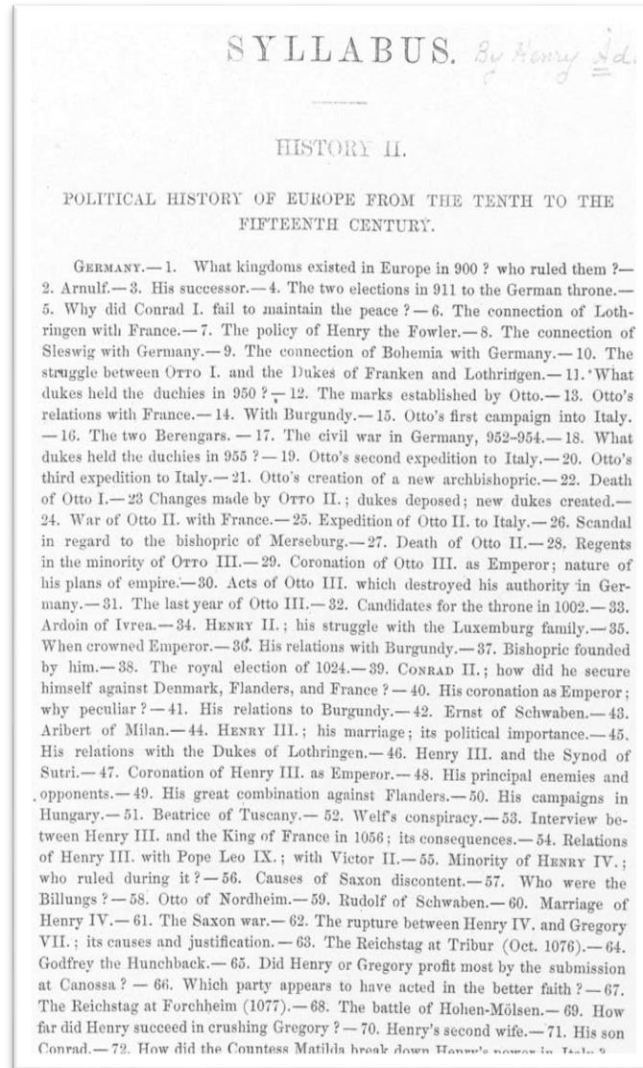
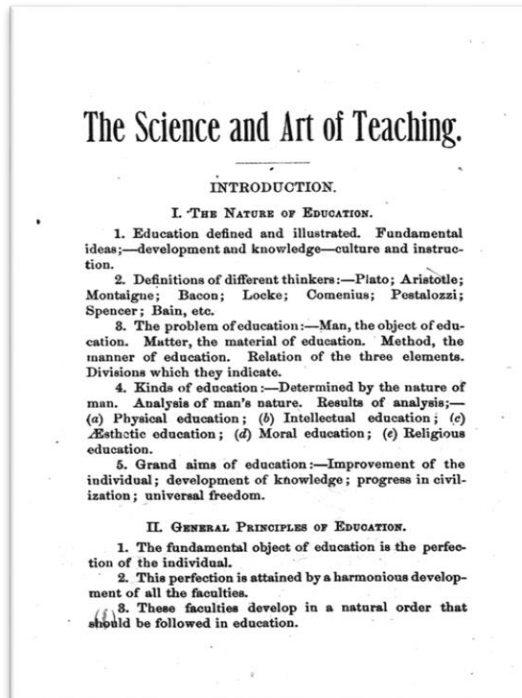
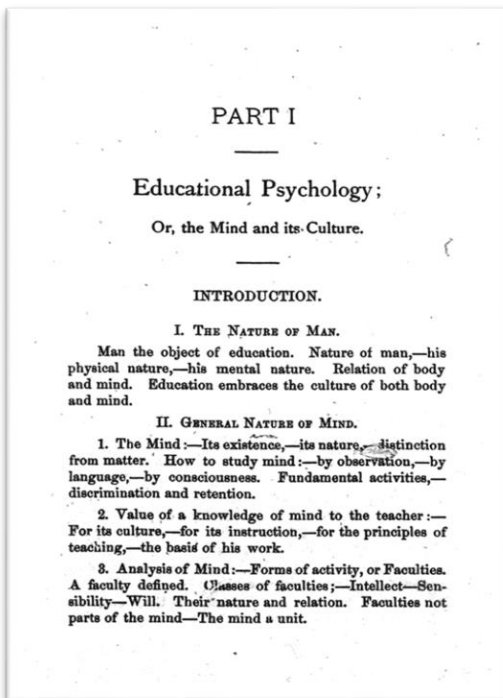
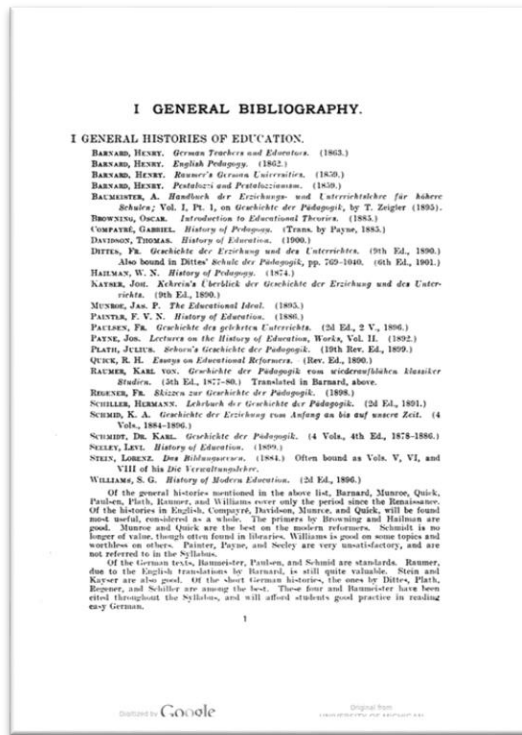
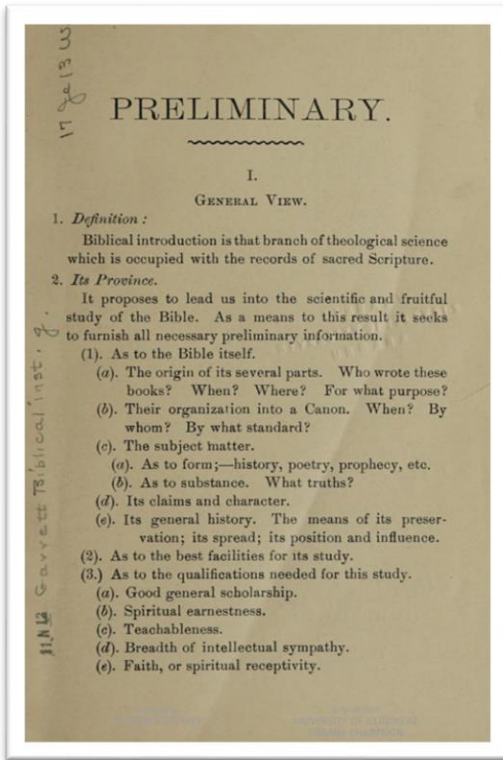


Figure 29

Hemenway's (1884) syllabus of lectures on the Bible, Cubberly's (1902) syllabus of lectures on the history of education, and Brooks' (1892) syllabus for a course in pedagogy.



In terms of function, in the preface to Cubberley's (1902) "Syllabus of Lectures on the History of Education," Ellwood Cubberly describes the syllabus as a textbook for students and teachers alike to guide their learning/instruction. Cubberly states,

Such a course of lectures must, for the present at least, be built up by the lecturer. To do this economically, both for his students and himself, a Syllabus of the lectures, with names, dates, and careful citations to authorities, is a necessity. The Syllabus is an abstract, telling much in some places and almost nothing in others, which the lecturer amplifies to a certain extent. The work of the student is to read and back up this outline (p. iii).

Cubberly goes on to claim that using a syllabus can reduce the work a student does in a class by half, allowing them to focus their energy on learning with a more targeted purpose: "With a syllabus, the student starts with the advantage of knowing just what is to be done and how to find the materials in a library with which to work. He spends his energies working to a purpose" (p. IV). In this way, the syllabus functioned as a tool to make learning easier for students by outlining the key ideas of a discipline, introducing them to critical timelines, and familiarizing students with the available literature.

Among these thoughts, Cubberly makes an interesting comment, "It [the syllabus] does not tell what the student ought to be finding out for himself" (p. iv). It seems that for Cubberly, the intent of the syllabus was not to control what a student ought to learn but to help orient and aid a student in determining their own conclusions and thoughts about the core issues within a discipline. John Vaughn (1799) makes a similar, but slightly different point in the introduction to his syllabus on chemical philosophy. Vaughn writes to the Philosophical Society of Delaware the following:



In reflecting on the important, and difficult, task you have assigned me, of exhibiting to the public, a course of experiments on Chemical Philosophy under your auspices; one of the greatest obstacles that presents itself, is the difficult state of Chemical phraseology. For the purpose of removing this impediment, in some measure, and of rendering this beautiful science familiar to men of business, who have not leisure to wade through volumes; I have collected a syllabus of the CHEMICAL NOMENCLATURE—which I request you, and them, to accept as tribute of respect.

According to Vaughn then, the syllabus is designed to help those who don't have the time or familiarity with the subject to understand it more easily. By summarizing and simplifying a complex subject like Chemistry, down to an organized list, Vaughn attempted to make it more accessible to readers.

Like the "Syllabus of Errors," the syllabus as a course outline points out a path, direction, or course that a learner could take to gain certain knowledge mostly by outlining the key topics ideas, and salient points. The ability for the teacher to provide this course of learning comes from their personal experience walking that course, or if they have not walked it themselves, they have enough experience to trust the course they are offering to their students. For the most part, it appears that the professor was the one who made the syllabus and determined what would go in it. In Snyder's essay, he recounts the story of Henry Adams who was the Harvard professor that wrote the syllabus for the History II that I shared earlier. In a letter to a friend, Adams wrote to a friend,

"I am to teach medieval history, of which, as you are aware, I am utterly and grossly ignorant. I gave the college fair warning of my ignorance, and the answer was that I knew just as much as anyone else in America knew on the subject, and I could teach better than

anyone that could be had. I have nine hours a week in the lecture room, and am absolutely free to teach what I please within the dates 800-1649 (as cited in Snyder, 2009, Para 2).

Adams illustrates the control that teachers had over the syllabus. He was given permission to teach about whatever he wanted relating to his topic and presumably was allowed to determine how he would teach it. The syllabus becomes the communication device that indicates to teachers and students, to teachers and administrators, and to teachers and the public or other individuals outside of academic institutions, what curriculum or knowledge that course will cover. In this way, the syllabus as course outline has a similar relational or contractual component to the syllabus as lecture topics.

### ***A Return to the Present***

We have explored a variety of evolutions of the syllabus (syllabus as a tag or title slip for a book or scroll, syllabus as a table of contents indicating what is in a book, syllabus as a list of topics for a lecture, the syllabus as list of religious beliefs, syllabus as a course or curricular outline, and academic syllabus) and now we return to the present moment, where the syllabus is understood to be a document that teachers pass out/read the first day of class to primarily communicate information about what an academic course will be like in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and the relationship between teacher and students. What do we make of our view of the syllabus now? Does this history suggest that the syllabus, as a material/genre/education form, is something alive and evolving overtime? Has the evolution of the syllabus stopped? If we know it was something else at one point, does that imply it can be something else in the future?

Throughout this dissertation research, I have asked myself and others questions about the materiality of the syllabus and if we could come up with alternative ways to see it beyond how

we typically see it (contract, teaching document, or permanent record). Mostly, the answers are “no;” “the syllabus is the syllabus.” Anthony Paré (2002) says that genres do a great job of giving off an illusion of normalcy: “The automatic, ritual unfolding of genres makes them appear normal, even inevitable; they are simply the way things are done” (p. 61). It can be easy to feel like it is an “impossible material” (Lucero, 2021a), because it feels like the form is so engrained and accepted that it resists change in a way that can make one give up hope for an alternative. Jorge Lucero (2011) gives an important reminder that the “ready-to-handness of the material’s substance and malleability doesn’t stop its metamorphosis though. No matter how infinitesimal and immeasurable the change is, the material of duration is alive with flux” (p. 233). Lindsay Rose Russell (2016) provides a similar reminder when discussing the natures of genres, “Genres are continuously and tenuously constituted in time. They are invented and reinvented” (p. 96). Understanding that the syllabus was made and evolved from various antecedents suggests that what we currently see evolved from somewhere and will continue to evolve, meaning the syllabus is not as static or concretized as it might seem, but is flexible and adaptive. I argue then the syllabus, just like other genres, is something that has evolved over time to fit the various contexts and needs of its users, and it will continue to evolve in academic and possibly non-academic spaces. There is already evidence to support the idea that the syllabus is evolving even now.

### ***An Evolving Genre/Material***

In 2010, Linda Nilson, the director of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation at Clemson University, observed the following regarding the syllabus: “Over the past few decades, the syllabus has evolved from a short, sterile list of required readings, topics, assignments, and dates to an elaborate, detailed blueprint for a carefully constructed learning

experience” (p. 41). If we compare the following syllabi from the 1950s, 1990s, and 2020s (see images) we can see what Nilson is talking about. While many contemporary academic syllabi still give a significant portion of their space to outlining the curriculum of a course, there is now a greater emphasis placed on explaining the pedagogical and relational aspects of the classroom, which might be due to the democratization of education and the efforts of teachers to be more explicit, conscientious, and self-reflective in their efforts to help students in their learning journey. The expansion of the syllabus in both terms of content and purposes has led to what some describe as “syllabus bloat” (Jones, 2011; Schuman, 2014; Deans, 2019)—when the syllabus is so full of content, policies, and procedures that it begins to read like the “terms of service agreements” that are frequently skimmed over resulting in the syllabus losing its usefulness beyond being some quasi-legal document. Graziano, et al., (2019) further this point when they state,

As a double consequence of (some) critical pedagogies becoming incorporated into the teaching process and universities striving to reduce their liability risks, academic syllabi have become increasingly complex and extensive documents. They are now understood as both a ‘social contract’ between the teachers and their students, and ‘terms of service’ between the institution providing educational services and the students increasingly framed as sovereign consumers making choices in the market of educational services. The growing official import of the syllabus has had the effect that educators have started to reflect on how the syllabus translates the power dynamics into their classroom” (p. 123).

One explanation for the more explicit and longer syllabi, might be that the syllabus, like schools in general, are being compelled towards a model of education that is more structured, deliberate,

systematic, and predictable in order to produce desired results that can be measured on tests and validated through things like degrees, awards, and credits (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; Smith, 1999, 2008; Eraut, 2000; Dewey, 1916/2009). Nadine Kalin (2012), in her article “(de)Fending Art Education Through the Pedagogical Turn,” claims this concretizing is part of a larger trend in education to produce tangible results according to authoritarian models of learning that focus on economic logics and little else. She claims that knowledge production in higher education has been becoming more institutionalized to reflect neoliberal and market ideals, which are merely responses to the forces, systems, values, and ideas of our larger society. As a result, Kalin argues that the syllabus and knowledge production is “bureaucratized, an object hardened into certainty, measurable, and alienated from volition, emotion, intuition, or corporeality” (p. 43). Luke, et al., (2013) also claim that education is trending in the direction of becoming more specified and unilateral, resulting in the syllabus becoming more directive, packaged, and scripted, which they claim will eventually deskill teachers and inhibit quality instruction and equity in education:

One of the paradoxes of our current educational context is that three decades later curriculum policy continues to ignore this case as our systems push toward increased accountability of teacher and student work in ways that deprofessionalize and limit what is possible in classrooms, and prescriptive curriculum that aim to produce consistency of practice rather than of expectations and access. And all this in the name of social justice, equity and quality. (p. vii).

Paul Musgrave (2022) argues the growing length of syllabi is likely due to the democratization of higher education, the challenges of working with students and wanting to be more explicit in guiding them, and the bureaucratization of professorial practice. With the shifts towards the

measurable, the certain, the controllable, education and the syllabus have become more standardized and concrete, leaving the teacher less control over what they teach and how.

These trends have been concerning to some like Ian Bogost (2023) who in an article for *The Atlantic* declares “the college syllabus is dead” (para. 1). Bogost, rather sentimentally, goes on,

You may remember the syllabus. Handed out on the first day of class, it was a revered and simple artifact that would outline the plan of a college course. It was a pragmatic document, covering contact information, required books, meeting times, and a schedule. But it was also a symbolic one, representing the educational part of the college experience in a few dense and hopeful pages. That version of the syllabus is gone. It has been replaced by courseware, an online tool for administering a class and processing its assignments. A document called “syllabus” persists, and is still distributed to prospective students at the start of each semester—but its function as a course plan has been minimized, if not entirely erased. First and foremost, it must satisfy a drove of bureaucratic needs, describing school policies, accreditation demands, regulatory matters, access to campus resources, health and safety guidelines, and more (para. 1-2).

I scoffed at the part where he calls the syllabus a “revered” document because we are talking about the document that most students don’t read ( Rocha, 2020, Crispi & Stivers 2015, Germano & Nicholls, 2020) and gave rise to the first week of classes being called, “syllabus week” or “syll week” and is considered a party week because going over the syllabus is seen as a waste of time (Rodriguez, 2011; Lovings, 2016). Bogost does have a point though, the syllabus—that brief course outline—he remembers and apparently revered, is gone, and in its place is a new type of syllabus.

On a different note, but still sticking with the death theme, Mano Singham (2007) wrote an article in the *Liberal Education Journal* titled, “Death to the Syllabus,” in which he declares “IT IS TIME to declare war on the traditional course syllabus” (p. 52). Singham’s reasoning for such a bold declaration is his belief that the syllabus does not reflect the kind of experience he envisions learning to be. Singham states, “The typical syllabus gives little indication that the students and teacher are embarking on an exciting learning adventure together, and its tone is more akin to something that might be handed to a prisoner on the first day of incarceration” (p. 52). In their article questioning the role of the syllabus in higher education, Palmer, et al., (2016) make a note of those like Singham, who call for the destruction of the syllabus, but conclude in their assessment that the syllabus still has a future: “We need to require the right type of syllabi. Our study supports the claims that syllabi should not be the authoritarian, policy-laded, contractual documents they have come to be, both in principle and practice, but instead invitations into rich, meaningful, and supportive learning experiences” (p. 46). I see these comments as indicators that something is happening to the syllabus, or maybe, that education itself is at a crossroads and trying to determine what it will be.

### ***A Contested Space***

In a similar vein, over the past few years, the syllabus has increasingly become a contested space because people have begun to see it as Luke, et al., (2013) contend, “the locus of curriculum authority” (p.viii). Germano and Nicholls (2020) use different words to express this same idea: “the word itself [syllabus] is almost a synonym for the methodical organization of modern educational practice: syllabus equals authority, or at least stands as authority’s flag” (pgs. 6-7). Germano and Nicholls further claim that the syllabus is increasingly becoming a “contested space” (p.10) where the control over the syllabus is slowly slipping away from

teachers. I have heard more and more occasions where parents and political groups are scrutinizing syllabi to challenge what is being taught in schools or what Musgrave (2022) describes as a “battlefield” (n.p.). Amy Nelson (2022), in an article for *Fox News*, wrote about a controversy that took place between a group of parents, a conservative policy organization, and a public school district in Georgia over an AP class syllabus that listed Marxism and Critical Race Theory as things that would be discussed. According to Nelson, when there was public outcry by concerned parents and conservative activists claiming the school was attempting to brainwash their kids and teach them to be racists, the school district deleted the syllabus, adding more fire to the critics who said it was a sign of the school district’s guilt and wrongdoing. These types of stories are not outliers, but are becoming more and more frequent (see Nossel, 2022 & Musgrave, 2022), which suggests that the syllabus is not the unimportant and mundane thing it might have thought of but is instead a site of power in terms of its role in education. What traditionally was seen as the right and responsibility of the teacher—the construction and implementation of the syllabus—is now being contested and has increasingly become a subject that is analyzed and debated by concerned parents, lawmakers, and administrators.

### ***The Periphery, Emergent, & Alternative Syllabi***

Up to this point, I have roughly traced out in the syllabus constellation the historical examples of syllabi that were the antecedent forms that led up to the current syllabus genre. I have also described the current syllabus and some of the ways it is evolving or being contested. I now shift to examples or occurrences of the “syllabus” that counter, redefine, or destroy the typical syllabus understanding by using the conventional forms/genres of syllabi in new ways that sets them apart as a new emergent syllabus. I also will provide a few examples of syllabi that exist in the periphery.



In the introduction to *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2016) describe genres as “sites of social and ideological intervention,” (p. 9) meaning they have a set of values, goals, and ideologies they strive to work for, which inherently limit or enable access or privilege for certain users through the constraints and conventions of the genre. They go on to say that many Rhetorical Genre Studies scholars are becoming more critically conscious of this fact and the need for there to be “alternative genres, hybrid genres, or “antigenres” (Peters 1997)” (p. 9). Reiff and Bawarshi believe that it is natural for alternative norms or counter discourses to emerge in response to the genres and norms of the dominant groups within a communal space allowing for individuals to take oppositional identities. The following syllabi can be seen as alternative, hybrid, or anti syllabi forms, which resist the traditional conventions and current trends pushing education to become more concrete, controlling, and focused on neoliberal and market ideals.

**Ghost, Companion, and Shadow Syllabus.** In 2019 I began working as an editorial assistant for the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, and as such, had to review all of the journal submissions. I remember coming across a strange submission that was called “A Shadow Course Curriculum.” It wasn’t a typical essay or article but was a document that looked like a syllabus (see images). As Fredric Gunve (2017), the author, claims, the Shadow Course Curriculum takes the conventions and traditional form of the course syllabus and presents it as a parallel course, that runs along or (in)side a formal university course. Gunve explains, “The shadow course introduces methods and concepts of informal course activities that aims toward making transdisciplinary outcomes possible inside formal educations such as institutionalized art educations” (Section 3). This subversive syllabus is intended to help educators/artists to live within an institutional space and make change from within by disrupting, infiltrating, infecting,

and breaking down the barriers and borders that separate life, art, and teaching disciplines from each other. The Shadow Course Curriculum accomplishes this task by hiding from the university's formal structures and attention, by being elastic, amorphous, shapeshifting, and refusing to be precise (Gunve, 2017). This was the first time that I saw someone use the syllabus form as an artistic medium to express alternative ideas about education.

Gunve is not the only one who has used the syllabus as an artistic material to push against the conventions of traditional education. Nadine Kalin, a professor of art education at the University of North Texas, created an unofficial syllabus she calls the "Dangerous Syllabus," which attempts to work against or in contrast to the official syllabus that she has less control over. In her article, "(de)fending Art Education through the Pedagogical Turn," Nadine Kalin (2012) speaks about this "Dangerous Syllabus" as an intervention method to unsettle, challenge, or imagine otherwise the pedagogical structures or notions of "education-as-usual within universities" (p. 47). Kalin claims, "The artifact of the syllabus can rupture the circle of power and powerlessness that is ubiquitous in education. We can mark and make visible how the syllabus announces inequality" (p. 47). Kalin began this process by taking her regular/official syllabus and attempting "to make the familiar strange" (p. 47) by revealing the agendas and hidden curriculum that lie unsaid or invisible in the official syllabus. In the Dangerous Syllabus, Kalin plays with the traditional conventions of what content goes into a syllabus. For example, in one section, instead of listing what students will do in the course, she lists things the class won't do. At another point, she explains how she wants students to refer to her in emails:

When you email me, I want to be addressed as "Dr." because you are typically asking something of me and this reminds me of my power. In person, my first name is fine because I enjoy the illusion of cultivating friendships with my students—I like to

pretend I am on equal footing with you, except in email. The schizophrenia that ensues is intentional” (p. 49).

Kalin’s intent was to reveal to her students the invisible systems and roles that we use as students or teachers. These gestures seem to answer what Félix Guattari once asked, “How can you bring a classroom to life as though it were an artwork?” (Félix Guattari as cited in Bishop, 2007, p. 86, as cited by Kalin, 2012, p. 49). Kalin concludes that art practices that undo and reveal what we often overlook can offer a way to rethink what it means to be a teacher in an institution of higher learning: “Even as we are swept up in an era of standardization, institutionalization, and instrumentalization, I believe we still need to insist on “education as an alternative practice, instead of a reinforcing practice, as a crucial basis from which to start” (Krauss, Pethick, & Vishmidt, 2010, p. 260)” (p. 52).

Sonya Huber’s “Shadow Syllabus” is another example of an alternative or parallel syllabus that attempts to work against the conventional syllabus and the conditioned behaviors students and teachers take towards education. Huber (2014) does this by creating a numbered list of 42 different ideas that address a variety of traditions like the urge of students to only read the syllabus to know how to achieve an “A” grade or using a syllabus to control what cannot be controlled. Huber’s syllabus moves away from the syllabus-as-contract view and into the syllabus-as-a place to have an open conversation with students about the messiness of learning. She grants students permission to be real people with concerns, questions, and their own sets of preferences when it comes to how they learn, while simultaneously allowing the same for herself.

The last example is provided to us by Lucy Bailey (2010), who wrote an article for *Feminist Teacher* called, “The Other Syllabus: rendering teaching politics visible in the graduate

pedagogy seminar.” Bailey’s “other” syllabus is part theory, part tool, part course overview that is designed to “pair with the “conventional” class syllabus—the norm, the center, the syllabus against which the Other is constructed” (p.141). While the conventional syllabus is authoritative and presents things like course requirements, outcomes, standards, and methods for evaluation, the “other syllabus” critiques and contextualizes aspects of the course like the themes, assignments, and standards. The form looks like a traditional syllabus but emphasizes a certain tentativeness that is typically not seen in syllabi. In Bailey’s “other syllabus” she explains the reason for having two syllabi: “To make visible some of the forces shaping instructors’ choices in what might otherwise appear to be an individually-determined, authoritative, seamless, objective course syllabus and curriculum” (p. 143). By making “visible hidden dynamics” (p. 151), Bailey hopes to create more introspection in the classroom for both teachers and students and to see her syllabus as a compliment to the official syllabus by creating a way to have more complete conversation about the agendas and goals of education.

**Student Centered Syllabi.** In the article, “The Purposes of a Syllabus,” Parkes and Harris (2010) report that many teachers feel it is their right and responsibility to make all decisions pertaining to the syllabus in terms of how they will teach and what expectations they can have for students. The professor is the one who gets to define the terms of agreement for the roles and responsibilities of the teacher and student. The lack of student involvement extends beyond the creation of syllabi and includes the lack of student perspectives in syllabus research (Baecker, 1998). While many scholars like, Gert Biesta and Barbara Stengel (2016), claim that education should serve the learner in appropriate ways, the decisions about what curriculum will be taught, what pedagogical techniques will be used, and how the student learning will be monitored and accessed almost exclusively remain in the domain of the teacher alone.

Scholars like Judith Grunert (1997), Michael Breen and Andrew Littlejohn (2000), Mary Eberly, Sarah Newton, and Robert Wiggins (2001), and David Kaplan and Monika Renard (2015) have been publishing scholarship that challenges the teacher centered traditions and advocate for ways of making the syllabus student-centered. Their work often has more ways for students to negotiate and collaborate in the construction of the syllabus. Karen Cardozo's (2006) "experiential syllabus" is a good example of the way some professors are trying to include students in the process of making a syllabus. Cardozo explains,

To respond to these challenges, I asked students to function as professors and to design, in small groups, their own Introduction to Literature syllabi. This semester-long project culminated in a series of final presentations whereby each "faculty team" performed a mock first day of class. In twenty- to thirty-minute presentations, they handed out actual syllabi and introduced us, their hypothetical students, to the themes and goals of their courses (p. 407).

Cardozo expressed some surprise by the way students were able to theorize and work through the complex decisions that she typically made on her own.

**Alternate Forms.** As previously mentioned, there are a variety of examples of people exploring the physical form of the syllabus to varying degrees. Examples include people turning their syllabi into websites (Crispi and Stivers, 2015), charts or other data visualization methods (Wildenradt, n.d.), animations, a role player video game manual, newsletters, four-fold booklets, comic books, and YouTube Videos (Jones, 2012a, 2012b). Amy Devitt (2017) broke from the tradition that the syllabus is solely created by the teacher by leaving open spaces in her syllabus for students to contribute their own ideas. Sharon Hockensmith (2008) suggested that a syllabus could be designed for a shorter duration, going against the typical idea that a syllabus should

stretch for the duration of an entire semester. Hockensmith argues that making separate syllabi for shorter durations can allow a teacher to be more responsive to the emergent curriculum and to be more collaborative with students. Tonya Hangen (2011), in a post titled, “Extreme Makeover, Syllabus Edition,” details how she updated her syllabus by making it look like a newsletter, where she added color, images, and organized it in a way that was more engaging visually (see images).

Do these changes in form represent a new iteration or type of syllabus altogether or have they merely altered the academic syllabus’ form? The curator, Irit Rogoff (2008), in addressing the pedagogical/educational turn in contemporary art, once wrote,

[It] seems pertinent to ask to what extent the hardening of a turn into a series of generic or stylistic tropes can be seen as capable of resolving the urgencies that underwrote it in the first place? In other words, does an educational turn in curating address education or curating at precisely the points at which it urgently needs to be shaken up and made uncomfortable? (p. 1).

Rogoff’s questions, while given in the context of the educational turn in art, are pertinent for the syllabus as well. In many of these instances, professors made changes to the form of their syllabus, but these changes may not drastically change, shake up, or make uncomfortable the traditional purpose, content, or function of the academic syllabus, which might imply that just changing the form of the syllabus may not actually make a significant difference in terms of what the syllabus does. One such case is Crispi and Stivers (2015), who conducted an experiment to see what would happen if they presented their syllabus as a website versus a traditional hard-copy document. They found basically no difference in student outcomes between students who were given a hard copy syllabus compared to those who experienced the syllabus as website.

Additionally, Ken Bain (2004) claims to make significant improvements to the syllabus form in his “Promising Syllabus,” by changing some of the language and structure of the syllabus to address areas he considered problematic. Bain was concerned with the way professors control the learning environment in both terms of curriculum and pedagogy, resulting in students feeling they have little control of their learning, which he argues leads to paying attention mostly to grades and not taking responsibility for learning. While his “Promising Syllabi” does drop some of the preoccupation with grades and might be more inclusive for students, he still heavily uses terms like “must” and “will” and is guilty of using the coercive “we,” which Baecker (1998) claims “is an example of an ambiguous linguistic marker for power, which can be used both to indicate solidarity or community and as a means to coerce the audience into behavior that benefits the speaker” (p. 58). Beyond this, Bain still conceives of the syllabus as a document that predicts and attempts to control what will happen in the classroom. All of this may point to the reality that changing the form may not inherently change the traditional notion of a syllabus if the conventional purposes, content, and functions remain.

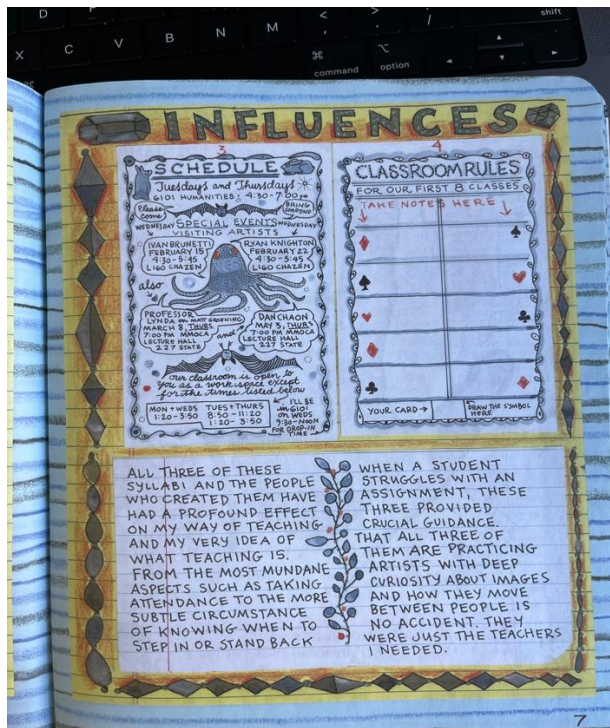
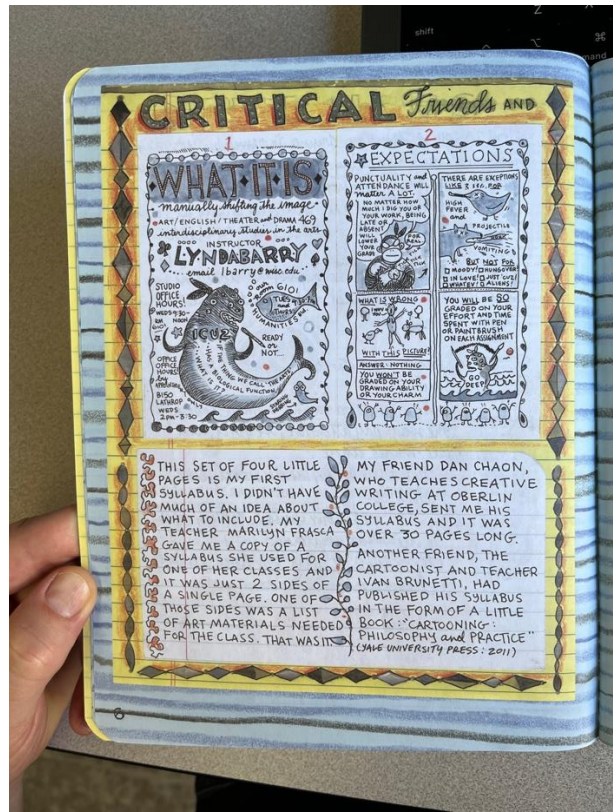
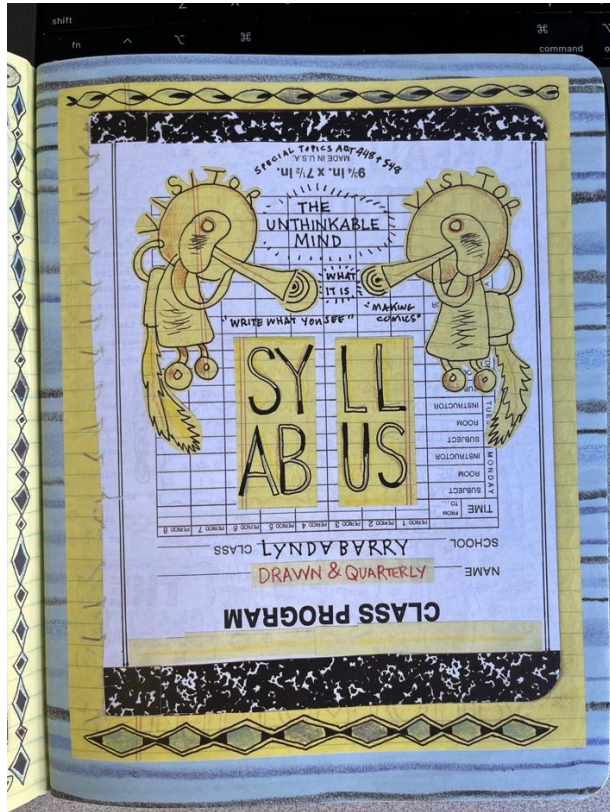
There are, however, other examples, like Devitt (2017) who altered the form of her syllabus to allow for students to contribute their own views, interests, and concerns that actually alter the function or purpose of the syllabus in more meaningful ways. Lynda Barry’s (2014) *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*, is another example of a professor making a significant change to the syllabus through a change in form. Let’s look more closely at Barry’s syllabus (see Figure 30). The first thing that stands out is the inability to quite sort out what it is I am looking at. Is it an art piece? A syllabus? An artist’s sketchbook? Barry’s syllabus is all of those things and purposefully hovers in a genre-defying space. It is full of drawings, hand-written notes, quotes, as well as things typically associated with a syllabus such as: course titles,

times, assignments, schedules, reading lists, quizzes, agendas, and even rules. It's full of Barry's own personal explorations and wonderings that often get posed in questions or propositions to students, like, "Where did you get your imagination?" (p. 34), "If you had an unconscious, how would you know about it?" (p. 35); "I need students to help me figure out how images move" (p. 9), or an invitation to do "a semester of writing and drawing by hand-until we arrive at the *unthinkable* and put it in book" (p. 8). In short, it is a personal collection of fragments she has collected over her teaching career that form a broader dissemination of who she is as a teacher, almost like a personal biographic. Through this gesture, she gives students, herself, and people like me, the permission to see the pedagogic value of the things we hide away in our notebooks, gives permission to write over texts, places drawing and comics on par with other forms of communication like writing; essentially, there are no limits to what things can be of pedagogic value.



Figure 30

Pages from Barry's Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor, 2014



**Syllabus as Scholarship.** In the inaugural issue of the *Syllabus Journal*, Alexander Sidorkin, Dean of the College of Education at California State University-Sacramento and editor, acknowledged that the writing of syllabi is often not considered to be scholarship or research, he argues that syllabi represent a significant amount of work on the professors' part and should be considered a legitimate form of scholarship. Sidorkin (2012) states in the editorial, "This journal is an attempt to recognize teaching by publishing the best syllabi, those that often go unrecognized" (p. 1). By utilizing the peer review system to publish syllabi, Sidorkin hopes to bring a rigorous and critical lens that situates the creation of syllabi and teaching alongside other scholarly research as valid forms of scholarship.

It is not only the *Syllabus Journal* that has been treating the syllabus as scholarship. Allan Luke, Annette Woods, and Katie, three educational scholars, in *Curriculum, Syllabus Design, and Equity* (2013), call for greater attention being given to the study of the syllabus and a greater respect being given for the significance of the syllabus' technical form in shaping education. Similarly, William Germano, professor of humanities at Cooper Union, and Kit Nicholls, Director of the Center for Writing at Cooper Union, in their coauthored text, *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything* they challenge educators to think of the syllabus as "seriously as you take the most serious forms of writing in your own discipline" (p. 1). For Germano and Nicholls the syllabus, that "almost invisible bureaucratic document" (p.xx), is a fertile space to reexamine the implications of our teaching practices on the lives of our students.

Another example of a scholar treating the syllabus as a topic worthy of scholarly consideration is Samuel Rocha. In *The Syllabus as Curriculum: A Reconceptualist Approach*,

Rocha (2020), theorizes about the ways the syllabus might be considered the curriculum and not just a tool to describe the curriculum. Rocha provides rich examples of his own syllabi where he has taken on the forms of correspondence (love letter), essay, and outline. Through these forms, Rocha discusses philosophical topics like love, art, and order and uses the syllabus to speak to his students about the things that are most dear to him as professor. Rocha's syllabi may not seem innovative because they do not look all that different than other syllabi, they often have the stereotypical course content, and at times can be quite demanding and authoritative in the way he makes decisions or sets up expectations for his students. But, at the same time, he invites his students to challenge him, dissect his words, dispute his positions, and come alongside him as a learner. He seems fully conscious and transparent about the power he wields as a teacher but uses it to make his courses authentic and meaningful, a space where students get his most real self. Rocha proclaims, "the syllabus as curriculum is a call to action, an exhortation to take charge of the work of education in our lives by making educational objects that stand a chance of fighting against the mountains of paper and trivia that we are presently buried beneath" (p. 186).

Over the course of doing my research on the syllabus I have read many syllabi and found it easy to forget that a living, breathing person with interests, worries, and uniqueness wrote them. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking of the syllabus as just an inert bureaucratic document, but when I read Rocha's syllabi, I had the opposite experience. I felt like his syllabi had an aliveness or a living reflection of him in it. I couldn't help but want to read the readings, join in conversation with him, and walk the course of learning he laid out.

There are other projects emerging where researchers are collecting syllabi into archives or databases, which allows for the syllabus to be studied more intensely. For example, the Open Syllabus project is non-profit research organization that collects millions of syllabi and then

analyzes them to gain a greater understanding of teaching. They have created a variety of tools for researchers to use to examine these syllabi and discover patterns. For instance, we can learn that the following texts were the most commonly assigned texts among art history syllabi: *A World of Art*, by Henry Sayre showed up in 1,884 different syllabi, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, by Helen Gardner and Fred Kleiner appeared in 1,759 art syllabi, John Berger's text, *Ways of Seeing*, was used 1,231 times, and *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood showed up 1,017 times. There are other projects or groups that have also been creating archives or databases of syllabi with the intent to study them and look for patterns within education (see also Jorgensen & Langston's "Syllabus Project," n.d., and Kane & Mckinney, 2016). While each of these examples varies in some way from each other, each treats the syllabus as something that is worth paying attention to and can be a valid subject of scholarship by researchers and educators.

**#Syllabus.** In 2014, Dr. Marcia Chatelain, a professor of History and African American Studies at Georgetown University, began an online dialog with the tag "#FergusonSyllabus" as a way to help scholars and teachers have open conversations with each other and their students regarding police violence and the recent killing of Michael Brown by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri. The "#FergusonSyllabus" created a space on Twitter and other social media platforms for people to share resources (books, blogs, videos, etc.) that could help others learn how to talk about the events that happened in Ferguson. As Valeria Graziano, Marcell Mars, and Tomislav Medak, in their article, "Learning from #Syllabus" (2019), argue, this moment set off a trend of activists and scholars creating their own online and crowdsourced syllabi using the "#syllabus" to provide readings and other resources that engaged with the discourses or various political struggles of the users. Many times, these syllabi were created by People of Color, women, or

other minoritized peoples whose voices have traditionally been unheard or excluded in educational institutions. The subsequent syllabi differ from a traditional academic syllabus in that they are found on the internet, are open-access, and are user-made or crowdsourced. The #syllabi are in line with those who have been trying to decolonize the syllabus (Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020; Zidani, 2021; Fuentes, et al., 2021). Graziano, et al., (2019) claim that it would be hard to compile a comprehensive list, but give the following as examples:

All Monuments Must Fall Syllabus

#Blkwomensyllabus

#BLMSyllabus

#BlackIslamSyllabus

#CharlestonSyllabus

#ColinKaepernickSyllabus

#ImmigrationSyllabus

Puerto Rico Syllabus (#PRSyllabus)

#SayHerNameSyllabus

Syllabus for White People to Educate Themselves

Syllabus: Women and Gender Non-Conforming People Writing about Tech

#WakandaSyllabus

What To Do Instead of Calling the Police: A Guide, A Syllabus, A Conversation, A Process

#YourBaltimoreSyllabus (p. 117).

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture has created an archive titled, “#syllabus,” where they house a collection of syllabi relating to Black studies, movements, and experiences,

which range from things like: Black feminism, diaspora and internationalism, Anti-Racism, and monuments. Similarly, the online magazine Public Books, has created its own collection of syllabi that have been contributed by a variety of users that include topics such as: a syllabus on imperialism, a syllabus for how to read sources on the internet, a pandemic syllabus, a gun studies syllabus, a syllabus on sanctuary, a Trump syllabus in both English and Spanish, and a rape culture syllabus. The Mauna Kea Syllabus Project is another emerging project that attempts to create space for diverse voices to share educational resources that relate to Hawaiian culture.

In these examples, individuals have taken the conventional practice of providing a reading list, a pedagogical strategy that almost every syllabus has in some form or another and have used it to create space for alternative voices, perspectives, and positions. The #syllabi typically do not give assignments, quizzes, grades, or rules, but provide a list of resources for those interested in a topic to follow and learn more. Sean Dockray and Benjamin Forster (2018) in speaking of these #syllabi, said,

They do not announce a new world but they point out a way to get there. As a programme, the syllabus shifts the burden of action onto the readers, who will either execute the programme on their own fleshy operating system — or not. A text that by its nature points to other texts, the syllabus is already a relational document acknowledging its own position within a living field of knowledge. It is decidedly not self-contained, however it often circulates as if it were (syllabus section).

As Dockray and Forster describe, the #syllabi have a certain aliveness to them due to the way they exist on the internet and on social media platforms which allows for them to respond to current events in a more responsive way like JSTOR's (2023) syllabus about the conflict

between Palestine and Israel. The nature of them being open to anyone and crowd-sourced means users are free to make syllabi about topics that are important to them, which are quite different from the academic syllabus which Luke, et al., (2013) claim are seen as the “official curriculum documents” (p. viii) that typically reflect the topics and values of the institutional powers (administrators, faculty committees or councils, board or regents for universities, accreditation committees) (Musgrave, 2022). As a result, the #syllabi often address topics that are not typically within the scope or interest of the institution.

**Biographic Syllabus.** The next example comes from the Marvel Studios’ *She Hulk: Attorney at Law* (Hunter, 2022), which is an American television series based on the Marvel comic book-super hero world. In the show, the main character Jennifer Walters/She Hulk, gets in a car accident with her cousin, Bruce Banner/Hulk, a scientist turned superhero after being exposed to “gamma rays” and turned into a muscley-green superhuman who has super-size and strength and has a notoriously uncontrollable temper. In the accident, the woman gets exposed to gamma rays and becomes a hulk just like her cousin and then has to learn how to embrace and control her hulk-self. This sets up a scene in the show where her cousin, the Hulk, slams down a red-three ring binder on a kitchen counter and says something to the effect of “Here is the syllabus for being a hulk.” The syllabus details all the things he has learned over the last 12 years of being a hulk. He then explains that he hopes this syllabus will help her progress faster.

In form this syllabus example appears to be in line with the typical syllabi that outline a course curriculum. It is also somewhat typical in the way the “teacher” or person with more experience is trying to convey their knowledge to their student. Where it seems to differ is the idea that a syllabus could be a life story or biographical document. This idea is in line with something that Germano and Nicholls (2020) propose in their book on the syllabus: “The

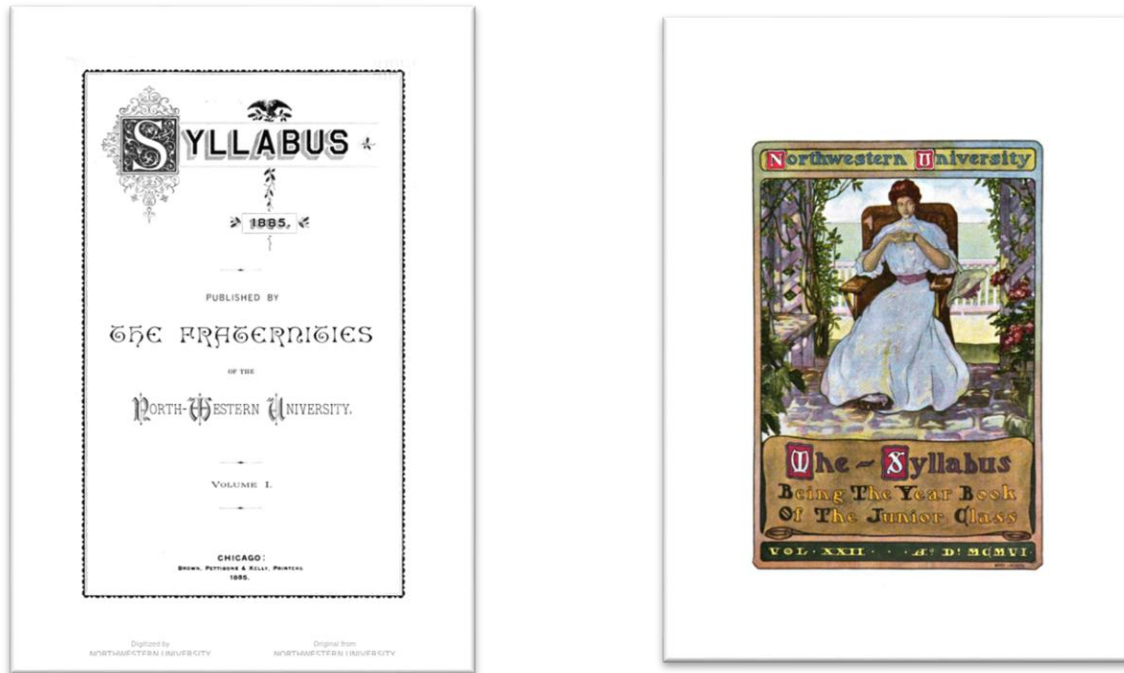
syllabus as we traditionally know it may read as if it's all about what will happen in the next sixteen weeks, but to a great extent it's really about what the teacher has experienced as recently as last year and as long ago as graduate school" (p. 5). Syllabi in this sense are documents that project the learning experiences of the creator over the future experiences of their students; a document that is oriented towards the future but tells the history of the past.

While searching through online archives, I came across Northwestern University's "syllabus," which is the official undergraduate yearbook that started in 1885 (see Figure 31). The Northwestern Syllabus, like other yearbooks, tries to capture the memorable events, school activities, and experiences of students each year. Initially, I wasn't sure what to make of this use of the word "syllabus" and it seemed to be an outlier amongst the other examples I had been finding, which predominantly were associated with education or pedagogical functions. However, the more I have thought about this example, the more I see it as being in line with the previous examples where the syllabus is a biographical tool that is used to teach. For example, on the cover page of the 1924 volume, the following description hints towards its pedagogical intent: "In this, the thirty-seventh volume of the Syllabus, we have attempted to express that unity of endeavor and spirit which is drawing us ever nearer and nearer to a Greater Northwestern" (p. 1). The syllabus became a way of describing and passing on the school's culture and ethos. In one volume of Northwestern's Syllabus, I discovered the following image (see Figure 32), which I have yet to figure out completely, but seems like a creepy, yet enthralling way to illustrate the creation of a syllabus.



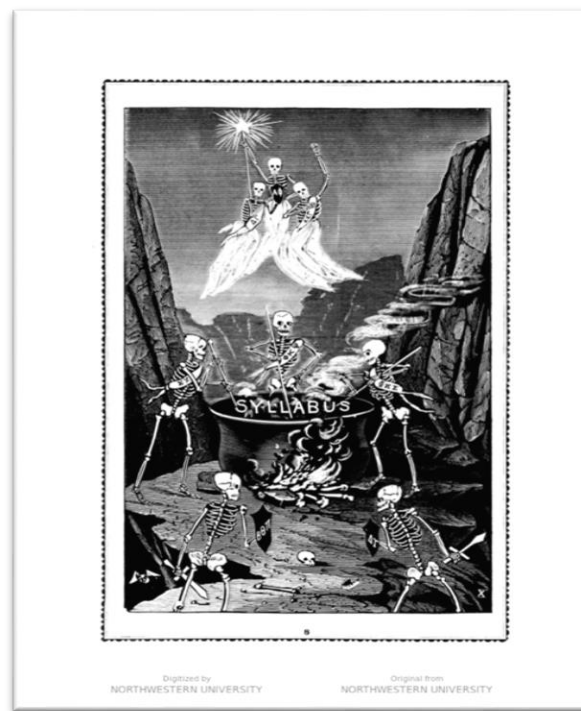
**Figure 31**

*Images from Northwestern's "Syllabus"*



**Figure 32**

*Image from Northwestern's "Syllabus"*



**Imagined and Performance Syllabi.** In the past ten years there have been a few instances where scholars have tried to imagine or speculate new ways of thinking about the syllabus. We will examine two: Jane Sprague’s (2011) *Imagined Syllabi* and Karin Shankar and Julia Steinmetz’ “The Syllabus is the Thing: Materialities of the Performance Studies Classroom.”

In 2011, Jane Sprague published *Imagined Syllabi*, an edited compilation of syllabi and writings on syllabi which Sprague described as:

[A] book length project of contributions by multiple authors that aims to collect writings which investigate, uncover, examine, complicate, questions, spoof, spark, incite, meditate, mediate, mix, sample, nettle, navigate, question, provoke, and otherwise (essentially) challenge pedagogical strategies pursuant to the work of teaching writing and other disciplines. This book includes writings which dream up, concoct, and explore utopian, fabulist, fantasy syllabi for potential imagined or real classroom endeavors: educational projects undertaken and employed (deployed) in and outside of official as well as mongrel “schools.” Official spaces might harbor (or cultivate) the mongrel & vice versa” (p. 8).

The book contains samples of syllabi that were implanted in real classrooms, as well as purely speculative, fantastical, or utopian syllabi. Some of the syllabi are composed entirely of images or personal documents/receipts, others are more poetic in nature (see Figure 33). There are some that are abstracted enough that they cannot be read directly and instead read more like an art piece or others that look like an idea cloud (see Figure 33). While I was intrigued with many of the sample syllabi and found them to be generative, I found Sprague’s call for works to be the most exciting part of this text.

Figure 33

Images from Sprague's Imagined Syllabi, 2011

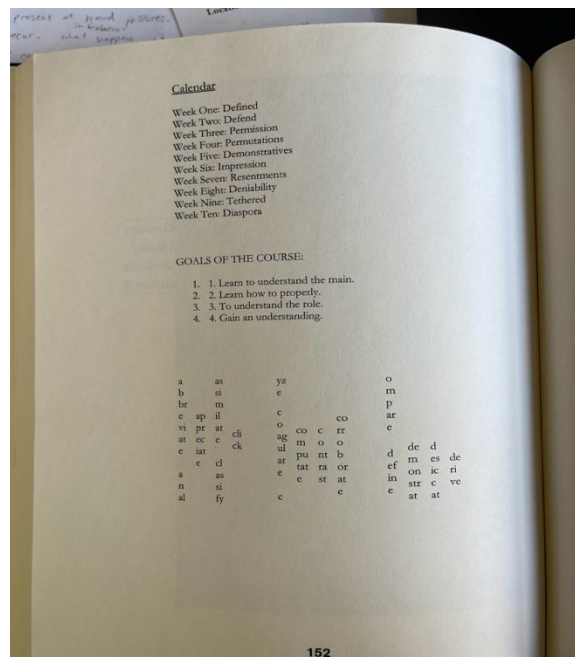
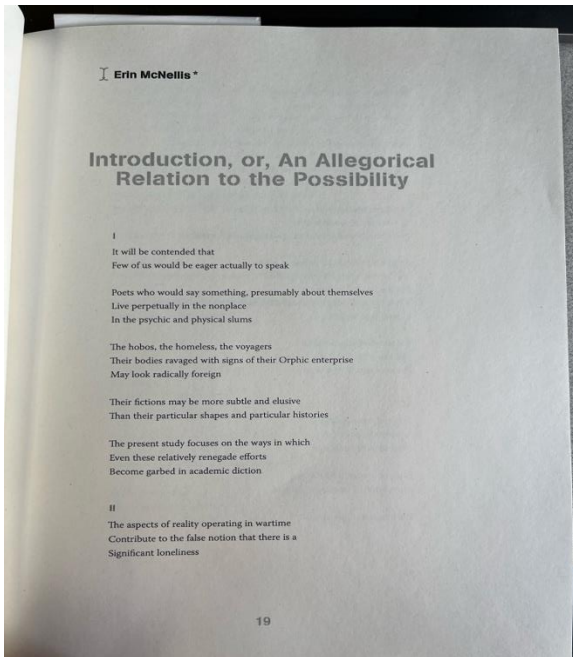
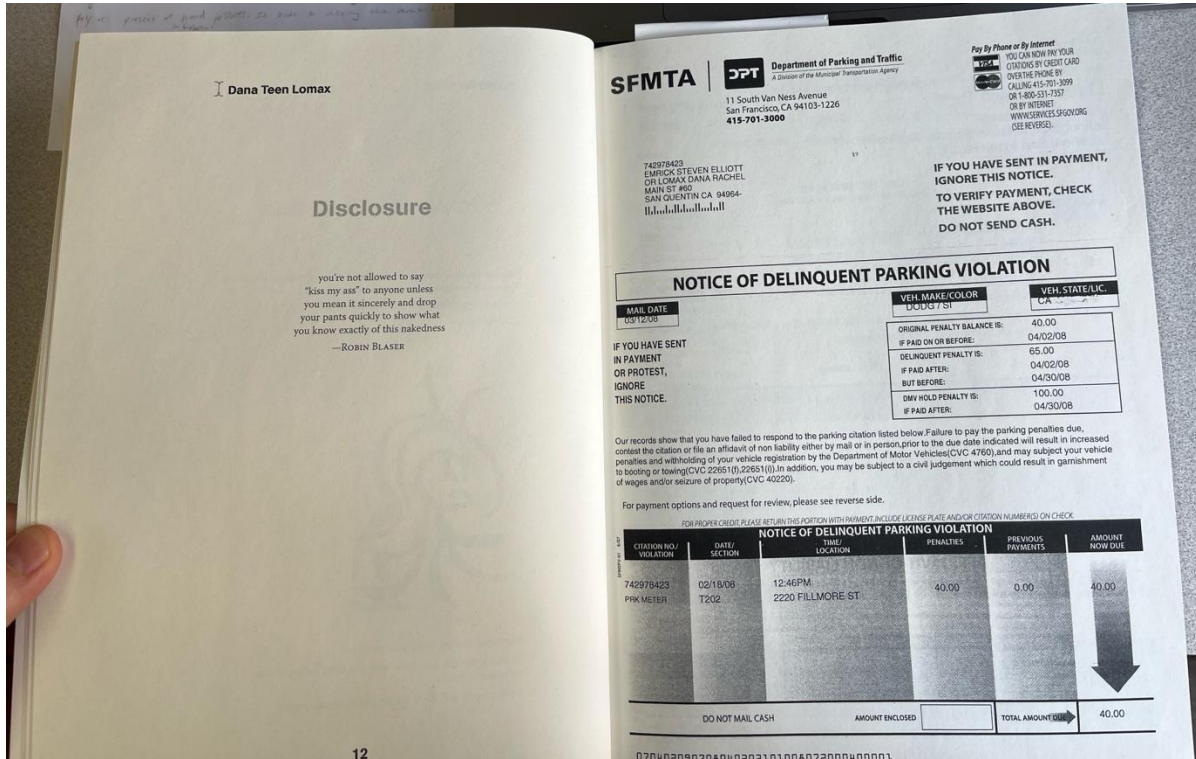
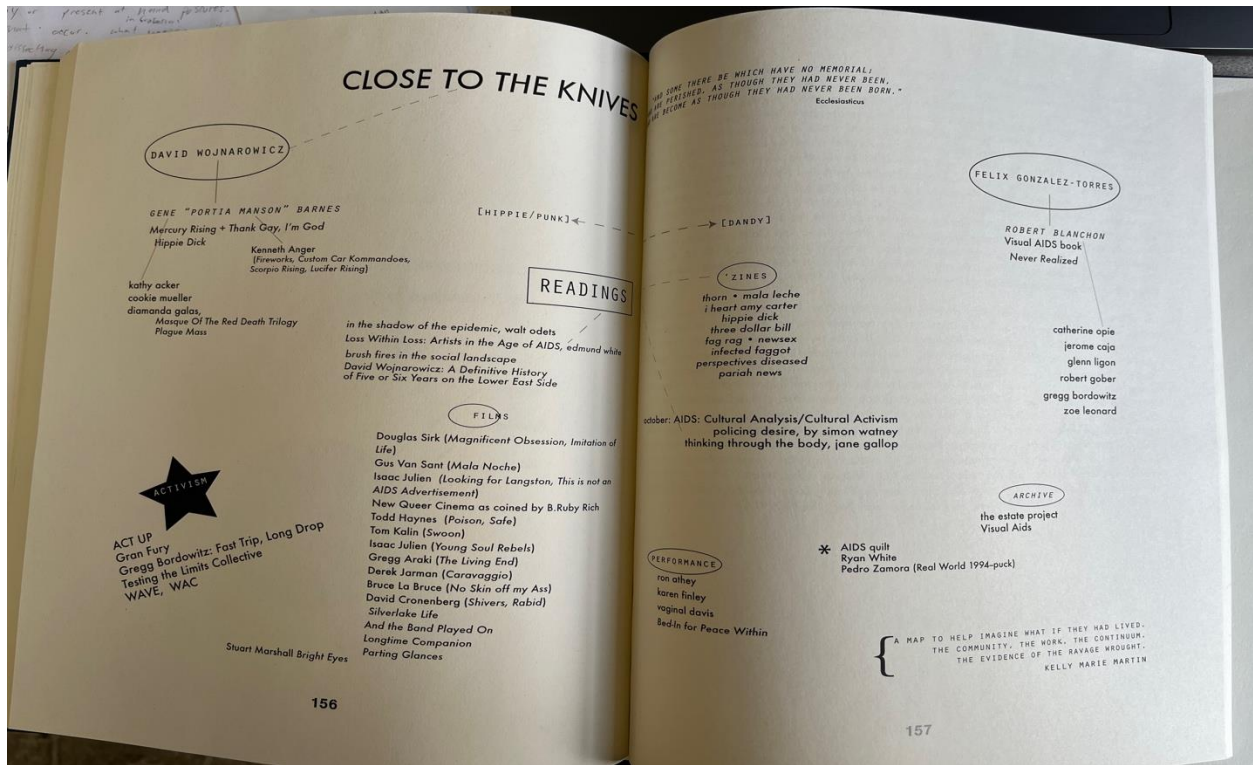


Figure 33 (contin.)



In the call, Sprague asks for the following:

- Sample syllabi that have been implemented or might/could be implemented AND the opposite of this condition: wholly fantastical stuff more suited to investigations in outer space and other sociocultural vacuums.
- Syllabi composed entirely of images or text or some combination of both. Syllabi may be scattered or comprehensive lists of pertinent, esoteric, weird or terribly useful URLs.
- Documents from classroom practices that were successful, compelling, disturbing etc. and which their authors wish to share, distribute, and make known.
- Essays/syllabi that mention other teachers and communities of teachers &/or documents, critiques, etc. &/or explore and extend the work of other teachers and communities of teachers, theorists, scholars, activists, revolutionaries, radicals, & and

intellectual insurgents...there is no intended, fixed, predetermined or official meaning attached in this cfw to the word “teacher”; “a thing which shows or points something out...”; teachers are sometimes not necessarily human organisms.

- Writings that disclose, assay, weigh the idea of the “syllabus” itself.
- Unimagined documents for unimagined learners among whom we could also group teachers/ professors/ instructors/ mentors/ advisors/ and so on (Sprague, 2011, p. 9).

This call, combined with Sprague’s introductory text, presented a slew of propositions for thinking about the syllabus that is enthralling to me and further added to the fire I had within to take up the syllabus as an artistic material. However, as Sprague acknowledges towards the end of her text, not everyone, even those she considered to be highly inventive and creative, was able to imagine something beyond what Sprague describes as being “outside a strictly academic map of a semester and all the undertakings, readings and assignments associated with that frame” (p.188), despite the many permissions to think otherwise that were granted to them. Sprague’s comment further reveals the concrete way the syllabus and how it is imagined as pedagogical instrument is entrenched in peoples' minds.

In a like-minded way, Karin Shankar and Julia Steinmetz, the editors of “The Syllabus is the Thing: Materialities of the Performance Studies Classroom” (2023), a special issue of *Performance Matters* journal, ask their contributors to critically reframe the performance studies syllabus by asking: “What does a performance studies syllabus instantiate or call into being in the classroom?” (p. 1). Shankar and Steinmetz (2023), two performance studies professors, felt a need to critically examine the performance studies syllabus because according to them “As an interdiscipline, performance studies has been incorporated as an academic field while still remaining sensationally unsettled in its interventions, methods, and objects of analysis” (p. 1). In

other words, the syllabus and other teaching materials have been overlooked or under considered. By giving an entire volume to the syllabus, Shankar and Steinmetz reframe syllabi as being vital materials that can be thought of as “performance scores, performative texts, archives of pedagogical practice, and finally, as the material trace of our performance as teachers” (p. 1). For Shankar and Steinmetz, seeing the syllabus in this frame comes from a belief that teaching is a performance:

Indeed, the classroom, for many of us, is our most prolific and durational performance site. These iterative classroom performances rely on scripts as well as improvisational practices, with new forms and constellations emerging from the tried and true. The classroom is then a black box: a space for the staging of collective process, of dialogical exchange, and of inquiry itself as a performance form. It is also a black box in another sense: the classroom walls obscure its inner workings, rendering the performance of pedagogy strikingly difficult to represent. How do we document these pedagogical performances and make them accessible in some way to those who were not there? (Shankar & Steinmetz, 2023, p. 1).

Shankar and Steinmetz (2023) then go on to ask the following potent questions:

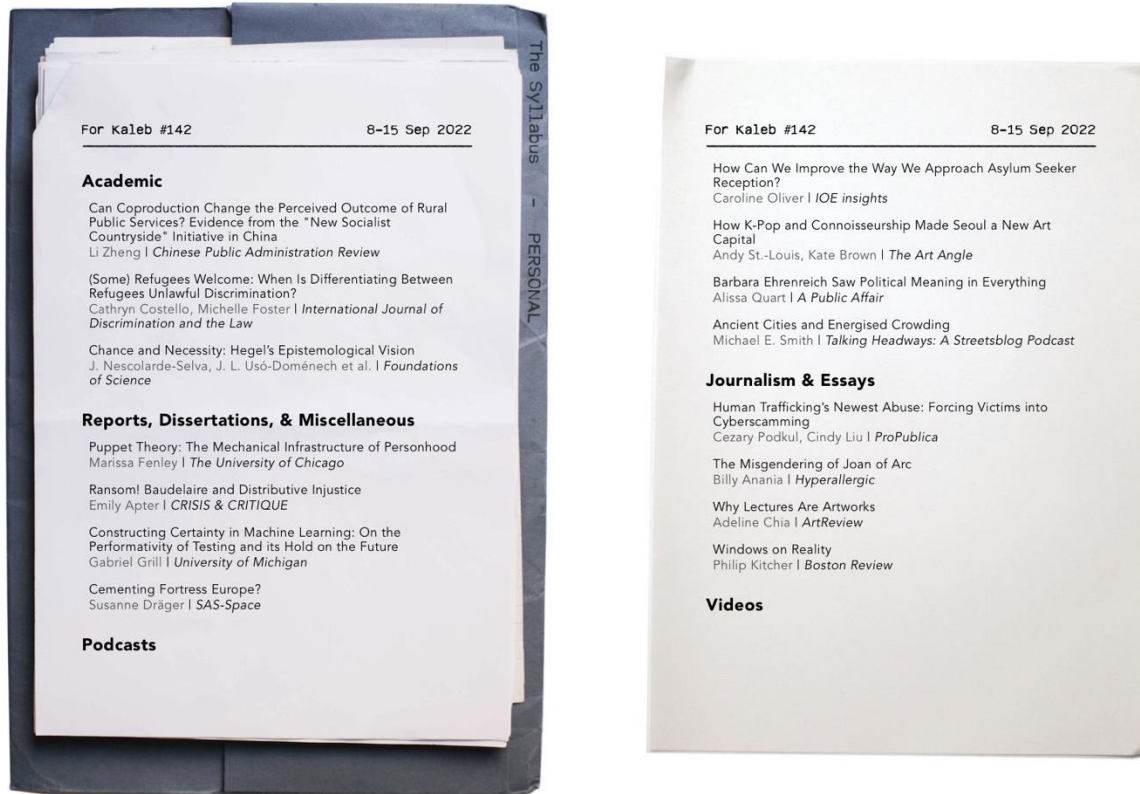
If the syllabus (from its Greek origins, meaning “title,” “slip” or “label”) is a protocol for an experiment, how do we design syllabi to serve radical spaces of knowledge-making and modes of coming to know? How do syllabi create new structures within which to learn, reformulating the dynamics and relationships between the positions of teacher, student, and institution, as well as our engagements with the world beyond the classroom?

The subsequent volume is comprised of actual syllabi and writing on syllabi that take these ideas and present various authors' interpretations. I found these responses did not push the form or conventions of the syllabus as far as the editors appeared to be seeking. However, this signifies movement within the academic world towards a radical questioning of the syllabus.

**Evgeny Morozov's "The Syllabus."** In 2019, Evgeny Morozov, a researcher and writer who examines the political and social impact of technology, launched a website called, *The Syllabus*. The Syllabus is a self-described "non-profit knowledge curation platform" (The Syllabus, about section, n.p.) that provides users an alternative platform to access high quality knowledge online that does not rely on the algorithms or agendas of Big Tech, like Google. The Syllabus does this by using its own system of automation and search algorithms to comb the internet for high quality content that is personalized to each user based on the categories, medium, and language preferences that each user designates when they subscribe. Each week, a team of curators vet the information collected and then create a handpicked selection they call a "syllabus" each week that is comprised of articles, books, videos, or podcasts that pertain to each individual's interests (see Figure 34). The musician, Brian Eno, a subscriber of The Syllabus's personalized syllabus service wrote, "I've wondered what it would be like to have a brilliant research assistant who could find material about many disparate things I try to follow. Now I know: The Syllabus turned up material I just never would have come across otherwise...It's bloody magic" (as cited by Getz, 2009, n.p.).

**Figure 34**

*Personal syllabus created by The Syllabus, 2022*



In addition to the personalized syllabus service, The Syllabus also invites various artists, academics, or scientists to be guest curators or “Cyberflâneurs” and share a curated list of readings and conversations they have found regarding a specific topic (at the time of writing this, January 8, 2024 the spotlight topics were “The Right Climate” and “The Post-Neoliberal Moment”). In her review for the Masters of Media blog, the blog of the New Media and Digital Culture program at the University of Amsterdam, Sara Getz (2020) argues Morozov’s “Cyberflâneur” concept was his way to take “users on a ‘stroll’ through different recommended links” (para. 5) that they may not be aware of to break the laws of attention economy and contribute to a more informed public.



Formally speaking, The Syllabus has a lot in common with other syllabi that present lists of readings or a course of study for someone to follow to learn more about a topic. The syllabi or curated readings that are made by the guest “Cyberflâneur” reinforce the idea of the syllabus being created by a person who has expertise or an informed knowledge of a topic. Where The Syllabus differs is in its personalized syllabus service. The syllabi created through this service are only generated after a user provides their individual preferences that curate the content, yet still leave room for a curator to insert the articles or media they see as being “refreshing” on a topic (The Syllabus, About section, n.p.), making these syllabi a truly collaborative endeavor, which challenges some of the traditions as to who makes or writes a syllabus.

**Objects as Syllabus.** The next syllabus example comes from the podcast *99% Invisible*, that focuses on the architecture, design, or thoughts that go unnoticed, yet shape the world around us and influence how we think and behave. In episode #492, “Inheriting Froebel’s Gifts,” Roman Mars, the host of the podcast speaks with Kurt Kohlstedt, the episode’s producer, and a variety of guests about the lasting influence of Froebel’s “gifts,” the educational toys/objects that Fredrich Froebel, a German educator and father of kindergarten, created in the 1800s as part of his kindergarten curriculum.

Let me give you a little more context about Froebel’s “gifts.” Tamar Zinguer (2015), an architecture professor who wrote *Architecture in Play: Intimations of Modernism in Architectural Toys*, explains that Froebel’s “gifts” were designed to be self-directed object lessons where students could play and learn about some aspect of our world resulting in a harmonious education between nature, society and God. Froebel’s “gifts” or “occupations” as they were sometimes called, included things like yarn balls, wooden shapes or blocks, paper cutouts, peas and slender sticks that could be connected, etc. (see Figure 35). Each object was

intended to reveal an element of how the natural and built world was made. The objects were ordered and numbered and given to children in a specific sequence according to the child's development, but Froebel also didn't expect that toys had to be played with in that order. According to Zinguer, this marked the first time that play was seen as a rational and acceptable way to learn, and the moment of children's toys being made with pedagogic intent.

**Figure 35**

*Froebel's gifts.*



While Froebel's ideas for educating children and his "gifts" didn't receive a ton of support during his time, they have had a "tremendous influence on the 20th century. It impacted all parts of society, of course, including art and architecture" (3:27), according to Norman Brosterman, author of *Inventing Kindergarten* and one of the guests on the *99% Invisible* podcast. In the podcast, Brosterman, Mars, and Kohlstedt make a list of artists and architects that were influenced by Froebel's kindergarten curriculum. The list includes the artists Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Buckminster Fuller and architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. Frank Lloyd Wright claimed that his early experiences playing with Froebel's gifts were foundational to his future success as an architect (99% Invisible, 2022). Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus hired a kindergarten teacher as one of its first teachers, suggesting that the basic design principles and elements that were central to the Bauhaus curriculum might have been influenced by Froebel's pedagogy.

It is not just in architecture and art that the influence of Froebel's gifts can be seen, but in the toys children play with now. At one point in the episode, Mars and Kohlstedt are speaking with Alexandra Lange, the author of *The Design of Childhood: How the Material World Shapes Independent Kid*, about the way modern toys like Tinker Toys, Lincoln Logs, Lego, K'NEX, or the video game Minecraft evolved from the concepts that Froebel introduced through his educational object lessons created in the mid 1800s. While these modern toys may have evolved from Froebel's pedagogic toys, Lange importantly points out that modern toys are much more open and less explicit in the pedagogic intent that were characteristic of Froebel's gifts.

It was at this point in the conversation that Roman Mars, the host of the *99% Invisible* podcast, refers to Froebel's gifts as a "*syllabus of objects*" (20:07), which caught my attention because it was the first time I had considered the way objects could function like other syllabi

that predominantly rely on written formats. At first it may seem odd to think of Froebel’s “gifts” or other objects as syllabi, but like other forms of syllabi, Froebel’s gifts had pedagogic intent behind them and a sequence that presents a course for learning to occur in.

**Syllabus Project.** A syllabus on how to cook an egg five different ways, a syllabus for making a bingo card for something you dread, and a syllabus for how a person who has left home can return are examples of the kind of syllabi you can find on the Syllabus Project’s website. The Syllabus Project has an open call for syllabi and highlights a new submission each week, along with maintaining an archive of past syllabi. According to Julia Gunnison and Gillian Waldo, the writers and filmmakers who came up with the idea for the Syllabus Project, the project began as a conversation about discovery and learning. As they discussed the ways that cultural artifacts, like the syllabus, travel through society they began to imagine how the syllabus could become a tool or space to do things like:

- i. present what you feel is important for others to experience or consume;
- ii. group items together in ways that shade and refine their meaning;
- iii. apply a conceptual or idiosyncratic approach to the syllabus form;
- iv. develop rogue pedagogies (Syllabus Project, n.d., about section, paragraph 1).

The kind of syllabi that fill the archive do these exact things. Some of the syllabi feel like an invitation to become a participant in the authors performance art piece (see Shannon Finnegan’s syllabus, “Bingo for Doing Something you Dread,” 2023), others feel like more traditional syllabi with readings and assignments (see Bettina Makalintal’s (2021) “Five Ways to Cook an Egg). Some of the syllabi play with the form of the syllabus as is the case with Erika Veurink’s (2021) syllabus “How to Come Home” which states the prerequisite for this course is to leave home and outlines an attendance policy. Others, like Regina Schilling’s (2021) syllabus titled,

“Check it out!” have been reduced to a mere list of artists and links to their website with the only pedagogic instruction the one implied in the title “Check it out.” Many of the syllabi give place to and highlight various kinds of knowledge that typically are not given space or considered valuable within the scope of academic institutions (see Faythe Levine’s (2022) “If You Love Me, Don’t Feed Me Junk”). Maybe the most significant thing these syllabi do is challenge the premise that only professors or experts of a discipline can make syllabi and instead claim anyone can write a syllabus because we each have expertise and knowledge of something.

### ***A More Robust Constellation***

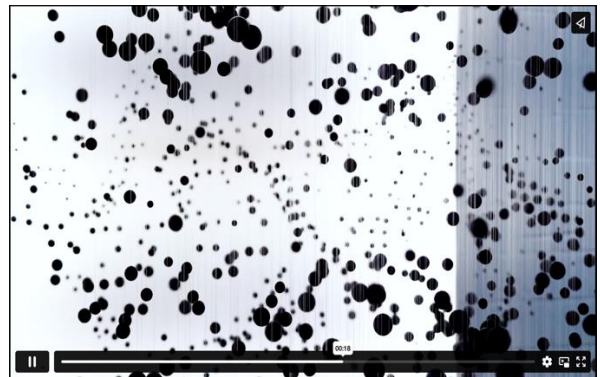
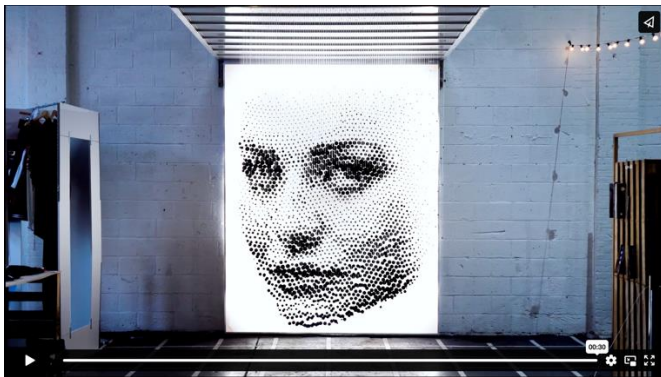
Let’s return briefly now to the idea of a syllabus constellation. My schema for the syllabus or constellation would not have been a constellation at all; It would have been just one star in the sky, all alone because I simply thought the academic syllabus I was used to seeing, was the only syllabus. I have found and presented a variety of ways people have used the word “syllabus,” both historically (syllabus as a tag or title slip for a book or scroll, syllabus as a table of contents indicating what is in a book, syllabus as a list of topics for a lecture, the syllabus as list of religious beliefs, and syllabus as a course or curricular outline) and contemporarily (Syllabus as a contested topic, an alternative, ghost or companion syllabus, syllabus as activism, syllabus as performative or imagine texts, syllabus as personalized reading list, and so on). What does the syllabus constellation look like now?

Where one star used to shine alone, there are now many. This syllabus constellation is similar to Thomas Medicus’ “Human Animal Binary” (2022) or Michael Murphy’s “The immigrant” (2019) (see Figure 36). When looked at from the side the individual shapes are just meaningless shapes, but when viewed from a forward position, those same seemingly meaningless shapes form an image. The way we typically think of the syllabus might be akin to

staring at one dot or shape and claiming that it is the whole picture. But if we were to step back and shift our position, we might see that the syllabus—the academic document—is just one type of syllabus in a much larger family or class of objects. Maybe the syllabus as we know it can be understood as a lower-case s, but this broader constellation I have described is the capital S syllabus. Seeing this broader idea of syllabus is significant and for the most part is what I mean when I say “syllabus.”

**Figure 36**

*Thomas Medicus' Human Animal Binary (2022) & Michael Murphy's The Immigrant, (2019)*



## The Essence of a Syllabus

Earlier, I shared an excerpt from Phil Patton's (2016) syllabus for a course on typologies. As Patton (2016) suggests in that excerpt, one might find insight into the nature or essence of a material like a syllabus by stripping away the differences between its various forms and identifying what is left in common. In looking for the commonalities among these various documents that functioned in different spaces and times, yet were all called a *syllabus*, I learned about the underlying forces that have shaped these materials over time. Friedrich Froebel (1887), the father of kindergarten, wrote about a similar idea, which he called the "law of contrasts," or the way that everything has an opposite. Froebel believed that it was through these binaries or oppositions like male-female, rich-poor, abled-disabled, natural-manmade, mind-body, or theory-practice that we understand the essence of things and their relationship to each other. These binaries may be thought of as a defining boundary, but may simply reveal a certain tension, issue, or the core essence at the heart of each syllabus form. So, if the various types of syllabi are analyzed, what is in common among them? What do they all do despite functioning in different spaces and times?

When I examined these disparate examples of syllabi, the first thing that was apparent was the difference in form, but as Patton (2016) suggests, if one looks past the difference or variation, the essence can be found. When I looked at these examples this way, I began to see commonality among these forms of syllabi.

The first thing that is distinctive and common among all syllabi is the way they function as a way to distinguish one thing from another. For example, a title slip or tag functioned as a way for readers, librarians, or others to distinguish one scroll, or tablet, from others; it provided a frame or distinguishing boundary that made finding the specific scroll a person was looking for

easier. This can be seen in other iterations of the syllabus as well: the syllabus as a list of topics for lecture clearly indicates what the speaker will be lecturing on; the syllabus as a course outline establishes what curriculum (core questions, themes, or skills) a class will focus on within a broad spectrum of possibilities; the Syllabus of Errors distinguished the false beliefs from the true beliefs for the Catholic Church. Even in the newer examples share this same this function: the #Syllabus distinguishes the readings and resources that address a variety of topics about specific social issues; the “Hulk syllabus” indicates the knowledge and wisdom Bruce Banner/Hulk acquired through his lived experience; Nadine Kalin’s “Dangerous Syllabus” reveals the hidden agendas, values, and curriculum that exist behind the scenes in a typical academic syllabus. In short, a syllabus is a framing device, box, line, or boundary that identifies what knowledge is valued and sought after. It says, “This is this, not that.”

The next thing I observed was that each syllabus utilizes a physical form that acts as a communication device coded with meaning to indicate and invite certain actions being taken. For example, the syllabus as table of contents uses intuitive navigational tools (tables, lists, tabs, page numbers) to indicate to readers how to navigate a text and recognize the important concepts or themes. The Syllabus of Errors provides references to other documents that invite a reader to learn more about why a certain belief is viewed as false. Froebel’s “Syllabus of Objects” invites children to play with the objects in particular ways like when the cubes, spheres, and cylinders were suspended from a spring which invite a child to spin them and observe what happens to the objects when put in motion. Lynda Barry’s *Syllabus* signals to students that drawing, doodling, and collaging are acceptable and even sought after modes of thinking. The academic syllabus is probably the most concrete form, spelling out to students the course of actions that are being invited (read this, make this, write this, come to class this way, address me this way). In some



way or another, all syllabi employ a language that can be explicit or implicit invitations for certain behaviors, actions, and postures being taken by the student or user of the syllabus.

The last component is a relational one. In the examples I observed, each syllabus establishes a relationship of trust and clear expectations. For example, if you were given a list of topics for an upcoming lecture, you would probably expect that the lecturer will address those topics. The syllabus as course outline, or any other form of syllabus that is given for an academic course, typically indicates what a student can expect to learn and be expected to do if they decide to take that course. Evgeny Morozov's personalized syllabi come with an expectation that the reading recommendations in the syllabus will be about the topics the user indicated they were interested in. At times, a curator might suggest a recommendation that appears to be unrelated, but a reader can trust that the curator would only offer something else if it was connected in some way. In the case of the syllabus as label, it is meant to identify where something is, it is important it does that, or the implicit trust or satisfaction in the social relationship will suffer (But maybe there is room for leaving the door open for emergent possibilities as well).

To summarize, there is a commonality among these varied types of syllabi in the way that they function—this commonality defines the essence of the syllabus. I contend there are three common aspects that make a syllabus a syllabus and can be found in the examples I have shared: (1) The syllabus functions to distinguish one thing from another. It says, “This is this, not that.” It is a framing device, box, line, or boundary that identifies what knowledge is valued and sought after. As such, it has a curricular nature to it. (2) The syllabus relies on a tangible form that acts as a communicative device that invites or suggests how those interacting with the syllabus should behave or interact with it. How that form is made, exists, and is experienced by others matters and has a hand in shaping how people relate to it. In this way, it has a pedagogical nature to it.

(3) There is an explicit or implicit relationship established between the maker of the syllabus and the future reader or user, whether it is the maker themselves or someone else. There is a certain level of implicit trust in this relationship that is connected to the perceived goal or positive outcome. Thus, it is relational.

You may have wondered why I hardly mention the form of the syllabus as being an important part of the essence. In her seminal text, “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller (1984) argued that genres need to be thought about in terms of their social action or what they do over their substance or form. Likewise, I purposefully have placed less importance on the form of a syllabus because I believe it is not the form that makes a syllabus a syllabus, even though the form is likely one of the parts of a traditional academic syllabus that we readily recognize. Take water for example, all forms of water have the same atomic structure or essence; they are all H<sub>2</sub>O, but depending on the environmental factors, the form of water will be different; when it is cold, water takes a solid form, and when it is hot, a gas. We might typically recognize H<sub>2</sub>O or water in its liquid state, but does H<sub>2</sub>O stop being H<sub>2</sub>O when it is a gas or solid? No. Likewise, the syllabus has an essence that is defined by what it does, not by what it looks like. The three essential components of a syllabus are common among all syllabi, but how these parts are expressed may vary in different iterations. For example, the title slip syllabi are relatively straightforward when it comes to what kind of action a reader/user of the syllabus should take (find the thing you are looking for), especially when compared to the complex academic syllabus we currently use, which often lays out specific ways to proceed (we spell out how to behave, what to wear at times, when we should do certain activities, etc.). The form will change the essential aspects and functions, but it is not the form that makes a syllabus a syllabus. I will address the form in greater depth in the next chapter.

## **A Permission Granting Space**

Inspired by Serra's work to "extend the vocabulary," I want to extend the vocabulary about the seemingly impossible material, the syllabus. Extend is the key word; it is not new, just lengthened, pulled out, and allowed to be more. I acknowledge that we already have a place of reference. I treat the syllabus as a living thing that can adapt, evolve, and is pliable, which gives permission to envision new possibilities for the syllabus. By employing a variety of actions like (mis)interpret, (mis)represent, or (mis)use, which I take from Pablo Helguera's "Notes Toward a Transpedagogy (2010)," I have defined new iterations for the syllabus that give permission to (re)think the material or how the current material can be reconceptualized to afford different teaching postures. This effort is not particularly innovative because, as history shows, *syllabus*, has been used in a variety of ways that are more expansive than the limited understanding we currently have. I am merely reminding us that the syllabus is something pliable that can be played with and changed.

## **Four New Syllabi**

I now share with you four new syllabi I have imagined as a result of this inquiry into the history and form of the syllabus. These new syllabi may not traditionally be considered a syllabus, but based on the following criteria, a new definition of syllabi arises: (1) The syllabus should function as a way to distinguish one thing from another. It should say, "This is this, not that." It should act as a framing device, box, line, or boundary that identifies what knowledge is valued and sought after. (2) It must use some tangible form that acts as an avenue for communication. (3) It must have a relational or communicative intent between the maker of the syllabus and the future reader or user, whether it is the maker themselves or someone else, that will result in a perceived goal or positive outcome. In a sort of algebraic way, if a Syllabus (S) is

a thing that frames knowledge or distinguishes the type of learning to be had (curriculum) (F), has a physical form that communicates how to read the syllabus and invites certain behavior (pedagogy) (C), and has some element of trust or a relationship (relational) (R), then the following equation would make sense  $S = F + C + R$ . And by inverse logic, if we identify something that does F, C, and R, then it is also a syllabus.

Each of the following four examples fit these criteria and offer new vocabulary that might expand the possibility for a new posture to be taken as a teacher. Each of these syllabi may look different and take on different forms, but underneath, they have an essence that unites them into one family of syllabi.

**Mixed CD Syllabus.** I was sitting at a gray table in the back of a classroom listening to four artists, who are each faculty members in the Art and Design School at the University of Illinois, discuss their upcoming show, "Black on Black on Black on Black." At one point during the lecture, Blair Ebony Smith was talking about her work for the exhibition and showed an image of an orange-colored CD with black Sharpie writing on it that her dad had burned for her in the early 2000s. The writing on the disc provided a playlist of music that her dad had carefully curated. Dr. Smith explained that it was through listening to these songs that she learned what love is, which she said was central to her development. She didn't state if it was the music itself, the specific curation or grouping of songs, or the actions of her father that taught her what love is, but somewhere between all those things, she found that she learned something about love because her father gave her that disk and she listened to the music.

Dr. Smith then proceeded to show more images of objects and photographs from her family's photo albums and the way each of the items had significance or taught her something. As I sat there listening, I thought, "Couldn't that CD be a syllabus of sorts?" It seemed to check

all the boxes. It framed certain knowledge and invited a certain experience to occur with that knowledge. The CD and the list of songs and artists scrawled on the front became the physical aspect that allowed communication between Dr. Smith and her father. Lastly, while I didn't fully know the experiences or intentions behind her dad burning this CD, I surmise that it was offered as a gift with the belief that Blair would enjoy or be enriched from listening to those songs, but it could have also been just burned a CD with some random music. However, the way Dr. Smith described this CD suggested it had a more educational aspect to it, which challenges the traditional view that a syllabus is only an academic document. When we look at what the CD did, it has similar pedagogical and philosophical functions as other syllabi.

Seeing this CD as a syllabus offers some new possibilities. It begins to open the possibility that teaching can be sentimental, an act of gift-giving, or an act of love, as a father gifting a cherished set of songs to his daughter. It leaves room for a teacher to offer their experience as a gift, yet, as a gift, it is left more open as to how the receiver receives it and what they do with it. I don't think Blair's dad handed that CD to his daughter and said, "Here is what you will learn from this, and I will assess in two weeks' time if you have come to the same conclusions as me." I imagine that when we, as receivers of a gift, recognize that the thing being offered is a sincere gift, something that is cherished, we receive that gift more graciously and with openness.

In some ways, the CD felt like an inheritance, a passing of something of value on, only the thing really being passed down is not the CD, but the messages in the music, the knowledge, and the corresponding postures those things bring. Just like an inheritance, the syllabus already is a cherished object passed from one generation to the other like the story I mentioned earlier when Jorge Lucero passed his syllabus down to Sarah Travis, who passed that on to her students.

This practice of passing syllabi down is quite common. Baecker (1998) contends that many teachers, especially new teachers, are in the practice of inheriting and using previous syllabi. In general, this is not surprising because we teach the way we were taught (McKay & Buffington, 2013; DéSautels & Larochelle, 1997; Pajares, 1992). When this practice happens in an uncritical manner, it may result in teachers replicating the style of teaching that was taught to them, which may or may not perpetuate oppressive practices. However, there is something beautiful about thinking of the syllabus—with all its mundaneness—as a cherished family heirloom or heritage that is passed from one generation of teachers to the next. In those documents are the words, thoughts, and collective wisdom of teachers suggesting a course of study for a certain topic. It is also important to recognize that not all syllabi are made with that kind of care and thoughtfulness, just like every CD is not curated with the intent to teach a daughter about love. And, sometimes, the cherished beliefs or philosophies of our ancestors need to be abandoned, even though they might be our inheritance. Either way, I now find that when I hold a syllabus, I cannot help but ponder about whose words are on this paper? Where did they come from? What history, story, or genealogy is present in this document I am holding? I cannot help holding that document a little more carefully, like a cherished object that one of my loved ones passed on to me.

**Nature Path as Syllabus.** The game trail marking the path to water, the pioneer seeking religious refuge, deer making a trail through the snow to the few remaining tufts of grass, the worn stone steps in a library, and the worn path through the grass field used as a short cut, can these all be syllabi? After hearing Dr. Smith talk about that CD, I found my thoughts sliding to the possibility that what constitutes a syllabus could be much more expansive. I began to imagine all the ways that objects, art, photographs, and paths could be syllabi.

Thinking of a path as a syllabus might not be all that strange, given the numerous occasions the syllabus is metaphorically compared to a path, road map, course, itinerary (Rumore, 2016; Hockensmith, 1988; Warner, 2018; Westbury, 2008; Hilton & Ekere Tallie, 2023) or even a “trail of breadcrumbs” (Germano & Nicholls, 2020 p. 60). We might argue that a teacher uses paths to lead us to certain views of the world, open vantage points, or show us where they walked to understand and gain knowledge. In this way, the syllabus is a path because it is a reflection of where the teacher or maker has been. It is a course of learning that comes from the biographical experiences of that person and is represented by us saying, “I know about this thing, and these texts, assignments, or questions. Based on my experience and best judgment, I will aid you in gaining similar knowledge.” But what I am asking is, can a literal path through a field or game trail in the mountains be seen as a syllabus? I argue that it can.

First off, do paths frame knowledge, curate a pedagogical experience, or distinguish itself from other possibilities? Yes, that is precisely what paths do. They distinguish one way to walk among all the possible ways one could walk, and often those paths have an intention to them. The path leads us to a specific place, view, or vantage point, even if the intent behind the making of the path may not be obvious. The unintentional path that comes from walking the same path over and over. The stone steps worn down over time and countless feet stepping on them in places like the university library or Notre Dame Cathedral are a syllabus of sorts. As I stood on those worn steps in the library, worn by thousands of people seeking knowledge, I was humbled to think I was also walking that same path.

Traditionally syllabi are made by a teacher, a person giving a lecture, the author of a book, which might suggest that intent to instruct or aid others is essential to syllabi making. But could someone leave a course or path for someone to follow unintentionally? Could they make a

syllabus that instructs and frames a way of knowing without knowing it? I think about the way we might learn by watching how others live. We follow the path that each of us physically or metaphorically leaves behind, which reflects something about our posture and views. The path as a syllabus can be seen as what a person leaves behind. Marking where they have trod in their life. At times, these paths offer a more convenient path that we do not know until we see it; they can lead to a place we had no idea how to get there until we saw the path left by someone before us. Those who made the paths may even have left signs or warnings to aid future walkers, “Don’t tread here I got bit by a snake” or “Watch out for the slippery ice.” I think about game trails that are not made by men, but by animals. These paths can enlighten and lead us to see what animals value (water, places to sleep, refuge, and how to move through a landscape). These sorts of paths may not lead to areas of human interest, but still offer a certain type of knowledge to be accessed.

The functionality of a path relies on some mechanism to mark a way, like a syllabus relies on some physical form. In many ways, the syllabus is a tool of prediction and fortune telling, it reads the past over the future. It is a document that is oriented towards the future but tells the history of the past. I am reminded of what Stephen Batchelor (1997) calls “shul,” a Tibetan word:

a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by—a footprint, for example...the impression of something that used to be there. A path is a shul because it is an impression in the ground left by the regular tread of feet, which has kept it clear of obstructions and maintained it for the use of others” (p. 80).

It is in these spaces that time is combined; when we walk on paths already made, we come in dialogue with those who made the path. By walking that path, we also contribute to making that



path clear for the next person. If we make a new path, we leave something for others to follow, whether we intentionally or unintentionally know it. Path as a syllabus is a space where the past is still alive, a space, beyond the mind, where past, present, and future come together in “unending, dynamic movement” (Mondloch, 2010, p. 36). When we walk on paths that others leave, it is like allowing another to teach us something. When we make a path for others, we are teaching in a way that leaves a trail to a certain way of looking at the world that others might follow.

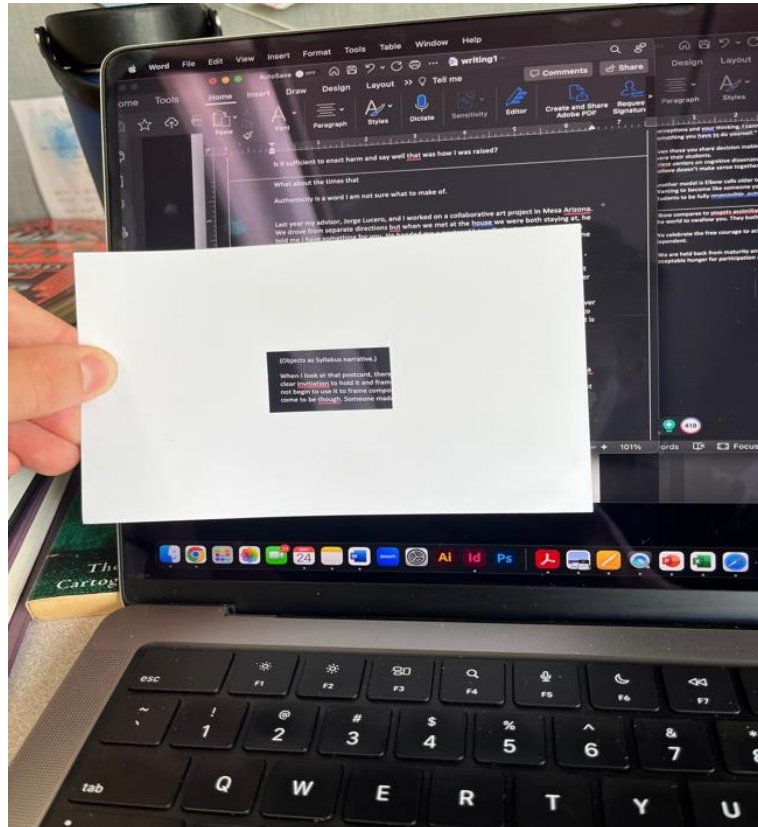
I like the way that thinking of paths as syllabi makes it possible that a deer could be my teacher. It suggests that the things we make or the paths we leave behind might have us in them in some way, which makes me tread more consciously. It is like leaving a rope for others to climb or leaving a bridge in place so others can follow the path behind us. Path as syllabus provides a posture of equifinality or the way systems can reach the same goal through many different paths (Montouri, 2011). There is not necessarily a right or wrong path, it largely depends on where you want to go and how you want to get there.

**O’Keefe Syllabus.** Objects can teach. Last year my advisor, Jorge Lucero, and I worked on a collaborative art project in Mesa, Arizona. We drove from separate directions, but when we met at the house where we were both staying, he handed me a postcard/viewfinder (see Figure 37). This term *viewfinder* comes from photography and references the rectangular frame or window that a photographer peers through to see what a picture will be like before taking the photo. In a broader sense, a viewfinder can be anything that frames a certain view or perspectives, in this case, a postcard with a small window cut into it that allows one to hold it and look for views through it. This postcard-viewfinder that Jorge handed me was from the

Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, which he had stopped by on his way to Arizona. As Jorge handed me the viewfinder, he said, “It’s a syllabus.”

**Figure 37**

*Postcard view finder*



I have since carried that viewfinder/syllabus around with me, stored in notebooks, or hanging from a pin on my desk bulletin board, which I stare at when I glance up from my computer. Sometimes, I pull it off the pin, lifting it up to frame various compositions and ponder on how it could be seen as a syllabus. You might be asking, how is it a syllabus? I think I have asked that same question many times. I have also never doubted it and knew it could be a syllabus from the moment Jorge handed it to me.

When I look at that postcard, there is the tangible materiality of it. The white rectangle with a window cut out of the center beckons us to hold it, peer through it, and frame things. With that desire comes a posture of curiosity, I can't help but peer through the viewfinder to discover some new composition from the space around me. That postcard did not design itself; someone made it. There is a pedagogical intent built into it. It was designed to help us look at the world around us the way the painter, Georgia O'Keefe looked. Liz Neely (2020), the Curator of Digital Experience at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, once said, "One of the most impactful things about art is how artists provide different ways of looking at and interpreting the world around us. Thinking about an artist's process can provide tools for honing our own sense of seeing, perspective, and design" (para. 1). Essentially, when we pick up that viewfinder, it invites us to look at the world in a certain way, the way O'Keefe looked at the world with closeness. Georgia O'Keefe (1962), in talking about her artistic practice, said, "When I started painting the pelvis bones, I was most interested in the holes in the bones—what I saw through them" (as cited by Neely, 2020, para. 1). In the same way, the viewfinder figuratively asks, "What can you see when you look through me?" The beauty of this object is its simplicity and effectiveness. The invitation and pedagogical parameters will be easily met. Just about any person can pick it up and engage with the concept of slowing down, looking, and paying attention to the world by peering through that small little window.

**Restaurant Recommendation Syllabus.** Last year, Jorge Lucero and I met together after he had returned from a trip to New York City for the College Arts Association conference. As he was telling me about his trip (we often begin our meetings with these informal check-ins and updates on each other's lives), he told me about the amazing meals he had eaten during his trip, largely due to the recommendations of one of my classmates, Grace, who lives in New

York. When Jorge knew he'd be going to New York, he asked Grace for restaurant recommendations. She kindly supplied a list, and Jorge went to those restaurants. The first one he went to was so amazing that he realized that he needed to eat at the other restaurants as well, subsequently leading to other delicious meals. While, of course, I was jealous of his amazing food journey, I was immediately drawn to the way this list of restaurants was like a syllabus.

Grace, a person with expertise and knowledge of good restaurants acquired by living in New York, had the knowledge that Jorge wanted. Jorge, on the other hand, had relatively little knowledge about eating out in New York and sought an “expert teacher” to instruct him. It was a reversal of the teacher-student relationship; now Grace was the one with knowledge to pass to Jorge, instead of the other way around. The actual list (in the form of texts on Jorge's and Grace's phone) documents and holds Grace's knowledge. Her experience cannot fully be transferred, but she shared it in a way that made it possible for Jorge to discover what she knew already. The list framed a certain experience for Jorge by limiting the restaurants to the ones that Grace deemed as being good.

There was a certain amount of trust that was demonstrated in this exchange. Jorge sought the information and trusted that Grace would give him good recommendations. This was confirmed by Jorge's first eating-out experience. If that first restaurant had been bad, Jorge's trust in Grace's judgment would have been weakened or abandoned altogether. Grace demonstrated a certain level of vulnerability as she shared her recommendations. What if Jorge didn't like the same kind of food as she did? However, she proffered the list and allowed that knowledge and her experience to pass to Jorge. Now, Jorge's experience at those restaurants was inherently different than Grace's, but to some degree, they now share a common knowledge about those restaurants. This exchange was about a relationship and sharing between two people,

whose traditional roles as student and teacher were reversed (although you might have guessed, Jorge, as a teacher, takes a posture that is more horizontal in relation to his students).

This exchange reminds me of something the French writer and playwright, Hélène Cixous (2017) once said about the nature of passing knowledge from one person to another: “What I have learned cannot be generalized, but it can be shared” (p. 7). In other words, teaching, or the syllabus, will always be an inadequate transfer; we can never convey all that we know to someone else because we are different people, and despite sharing similarities in culture, race, gender, or social status, we will all think, act, and feel in our unique ways. But the significant part of what Cixous says is that we can share. We can offer our perspectives so that we might have a shared sense of our human experience. I am further reminded of what John Ruskin (1885), the art critic, once claimed, “The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way” (p. 286). Ruskin’s statement resonates with me, yet it is incomplete; it needs to be coupled with something along the lines of, “Also, the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is listen to something someone else is sharing.”

In many ways, this exchange between Grace and Jorge might be familiar because it aligns to the traditional way we think of teaching as an expert passing their knowledge to others of less experience. I have found it easy at times to villainize this type of teaching. I disliked “teacher-centered” (Cuban, 1984) pedagogical practices because of the hierarchical way teachers’ are placed in a position of one-directional power over students, students are seen as empty receptacles to be filled up with the teacher’s knowledge (Friere, 1970). For example, I used to see lecturing as a bad practice, but by villainizing it, I only made it so I couldn’t take that posture without compromising my values or going back on what I said. Instead of recognizing that one-

directional teaching methods that are about transferring knowledge from the teacher to student have a time and place or context when they might be desired and optimal. For example, when a student seeks the knowledge of someone that has more experience like Jorge seeking Grace's knowledge of good restaurants.

There may be times when a teacher might teach in a more authoritative-one-directional sort of way because the situation demands it for the safety or well-being of those involved. In one of my Introduction to Sculpture courses, my professor began the course by going through a detailed and rather long lecture about safety in the sculpture lab. This lecture, where the professor did most of the talking, was his way of trying to protect us. There is no room for error, allowing students to have their own perspectives, or students learning on their own because some of the tools could severely injure or kill someone if used incorrectly. I am also reminded of a time when my family and I were traveling in Tonga when I was a young child. We were travelling on a boat at night, and I remember my dad holding each of my siblings and me up to the boat's railing and saying that if we played near that railing and fell over, there would be no way to save us; we would be gone and saying "Sorry" wouldn't fix it. In these moments, where there is no room for error, even if a student doesn't want the knowledge from the teacher, the teacher still must try and offer it because it is so vital. In short, I acknowledge that teaching can be less coercive and authoritative when it embodies a spirit of sharing or caring, despite still having a one-directional or teacher-centered interaction model.

### **An Expanded Vocabulary**

Now, there might be some that look at these examples or my constellation of syllabi and say, "That is great, but those things are not a syllabus." There is an argument that could be made that the *syllabus* as a word has a socially understood meaning (an educational document that

looks a certain way and acts as a contract, a teaching tool, or a permanent record), and I cannot just change its meaning because I want to. This argument suggests that language is something that holds itself to fixed meanings and does not evolve or change, which is fundamentally inaccurate in describing the way language works. Samuel Rocha (2020), speaking on this same issue, calls it “a predicament that can be understood as one of folk language and nomenclature” (p. 27). In his text, *The Syllabus as Curriculum*, Rocha claims that the etymological and philological analysis of such terms as “education,” “curriculum,” or “syllabus” can be “more misleading than it is helpful, especially when being done by those of us who are not properly trained in classics or philology” (p. 27). He goes on to say:

My primary reason for this view is because these terms exist today in the common vocabulary of schoolteachers and common folk. When we take these words out of their folkloric life-worlds too quickly, we risk losing the thing itself just easily as we risk losing the thing itself when we allow ourselves to thoughtlessly descend into the vulgar everyday. Linguistically speaking, the vernacular must be attended to with its own sense of sufficiency and integrity (p. 27).

I hear what Rocha is saying and take it to heart, especially considering my relative inexperience with etymology, philology, and historical research. Nevertheless, I am a teacher and as one located in the “folkloric life-world” where the syllabus lives and is used, I am also qualified to engage with defining this word and being held accountable for the meaning that I use, whether I made it myself or merely use the definitions I inherited. It sounds a bit presumptuous of me to claim, as I am doing, that I feel like I can play with the materiality of the syllabus or, in other words, change what this word means or bring back some ancient or new understanding of the word. But, why not? As a teacher, a scholar of art education, and someone who has studied the

syllabus more than most, why can I not be the one that says there is another way we can think of this thing? But that does not accurately describe my intent, I do not want to do this work alone, in fact, I am inviting you through this dissertation to join in this exact dialog. This is our word; it belongs to us, why not make it what we want it to mean? If we agree to understand it differently, then isn't it still holding its communicative function?

The misgivings people have about me exploring and redefining the syllabus might be because they think I am trying to destroy it or imagine some wholly new thing that is completely untethered from the basic logic that defines what a syllabus is. It is for this reason that this history and contemporary discourse of the syllabus are so vital. By comparing the variety of syllabi and finding commonalities among them, I have tried to discover the essence at the core of what makes a syllabus a syllabus. I argue that each of the examples I have discussed, both historical and new, can be seen as a syllabus for the way they function. In addition to being able to see the syllabus as a broader category of objects, its history shows that the syllabus is something that is made; and that can be fluid and can be seen as a living thing that adapts and changes according to different circumstances. This history then gives permission for the syllabus to be something that can change, while also defining the essence of the syllabus to stay anchored to to ensure it continues to be a syllabus. This history shows not just an interesting story of how word usage has changed over time, but a dynamic evolution of a vibrant material that has shifted and changed over time to adapt to emerging human needs or changing contexts in ways that have allowed it to endure over thousands of years. By seeing all of the variations, studying those shifts, and comparing the commonalities between the various types of syllabi, the essence or core as a vibrant materiality can be seen.



It is not a concretized form when we look at it historically, even if it may seem this way now. It also reveals the hand of the makers, their power, and the bias that is involved in the shaping of this material. If we know the essence of what makes a syllabus a syllabus, and not just a syllabus as in the current form, but all the syllabi across time, then we can use that criterion to imagine new types of syllabi or new members of the syllabus family, which might afford new postures for teaching. My list is only meant to show a small glimpse of the possibilities. What is missing from these? What could be added? What else shares the essence of a material that frames a pedagogical experience like a syllabus does?

## Chapter 4: Genre, Form, and Posture

In the previous chapter, I wrote about the way the vocabulary of the syllabus could be extended by looking at the variety of forms the syllabus has taken over time to find the essence or similarities that are common amongst those variations. However, except for a few moments at the end of the chapter, I did not really explain why I think this expanded or essentialized view of syllabi is important. You may have been thinking “What’s the point? Why should I care that the syllabus used to be a title slip or some person calls a bunch of educational toys a syllabus?” I also claimed that the physical form of a syllabus, which is probably one of the most recognizable features of the academic syllabus, is relatively unimportant in terms of defining a syllabus as a syllabus. In this chapter, I will try to illustrate why seeing the essence of a syllabus is so valuable for teachers and will also discuss the importance of form.

As I have been playing with the materiality of the syllabus, I have found my thoughts sliding towards ideas about curriculum and pedagogy or what I have called, “teacher posture.” I have come to see teacher posture as a “root metaphor,” which is a concept that I came across in Alison Cook-Sather’s (2003) text *Education is Translation*, but was first introduced by Stephen Pepper (1942) in his book, *World Hypotheses*. Cook-Sather explains that a “root metaphor is a commonsense fact whose structure, when understood, can appear to explain a variety of related phenomena” (p. 31). Thinking of teaching as a posture provided a structure or framework that made a lot of sense and began to give me new vocabulary and metaphors for thinking about teaching as a relational and situational act.

### ***Teacher Posture and Somatic Shape***

While I discussed teacher posture in chapter 2, I briefly return to this idea because it is central to explaining why the syllabus and the form of the syllabus matter so much. When I think of teacher posture, I think of the thousands of micro decisions made by teachers each day regarding what kind of teacher they will be in relation to the dynamic and complex landscape of schools. Teacher posture is not just decisions about curriculum or pedagogy, but includes the attitudes, beliefs, values, and world views underpinning these teaching practices and the situational contexts that teachers find themselves in. In other words, it is a system that is dynamic, complex, and highly situational. This is *teacher posture*—how a teacher holds themselves in relation to others (i.e., students, colleagues, parents) and other external factors (state educational mandates, funding, limited spaces, social movements).

There is a similarity between the way I conceptualize teacher posture and the way Alta Starr speaks about *somatic shape* as being a holistic view of someone's being. Starr (2019), a lead facilitator at Generative Somatics, an organization that teaches somatics as a way to bring about social justice in the world, describes somatic shape in greater detail in her chapter titled, "Cultivating the Self: Embodied Transformation for Artists," which is part of Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard's (2019) book, *Making and Being*. According to Starr, "In somatics, practitioners talk about "shape," which is how in each moment, every nuance of our experience is expressed through the totality of our being, albeit largely outside of our awareness" (p. 48). Somatic shape describes a person's holistic being, meaning that it includes all the aspects of who we are: our physical, intellectual, and emotional being. It also comprises our experiences, internal narratives, stories we tell about ourselves and the world. It is the unconscious parts of who we are, how we cope and respond to the world around us, and how we relate to others. Starr

explains that, “We become what we practice and we’re always practicing something” (p. 52) implying that our somatic shape is constantly being influenced by the things we see, hear, and practice, even if we are aware of them or not. For Starr (2019), the basic tenet of somatics is to become more aware of our somatic shape through exercises that strive to create an alignment between the various facets of our being and the values we hold:

The body, where our experiences live largely out of consciousness, is the starting and ending point for this self-development. Through connecting intentionally to what lives in the body, and to the larger social reality which, with its inescapable hierarchies of domination and exploitation, had determined what lives there, you can create greater choice about who you are—the artist, teacher, leader or organizer you choose to be—and what speaks through your creations” (p. 48).

In other words, our teacher posture or somatic shape is constantly evolving to respond to the contexts, cultures, and environments we inhabit. We can become more conscious and deliberate in the shaping of our posture through careful and continuous reflective practices.

One critical thing that Starr brings up is the way that posture or somatic shape is influenced and formed primarily out of the realm of our conscious awareness. For example, if we take our physical posture, it can be rather easy to forget or be completely unaware of the complexity and sophisticated manner in which the body balances and coordinates its moving parts because as Carini, et al., (2017) explain, all this happens mostly at the subconscious level. Mabel Todd (1931) expressed this same idea when she claimed that physical posture is something that happens at the substrata of consciousness or reflexes. When we look closer, we may begin to realize as a person goes about their regular activities, the body responds to the stimuli it receives from the external world and automatically utilizes a variety of subsystems

(neural, biochemical, and muscular-skeletal systems) to coordinate and position the body to achieve equilibrium (Carini, et al., 2017; Lee, et al., 2021). The body can balance the forces or conditions that surround it (gravity, wind, terrain, etc.) and automatically coordinate a series of movements and counter-movements to maintain balance and uprightness. While simply walking or standing may seem trivial or mundane, Lee, et al., (2021) argue that these most basic movements are anything but simple; in reality, posture is the result of refined coordination between the body's neural, biochemical, and muscular-skeletal systems and shaped by a dynamic interaction with an ever-changing environment.

One of the principal elements of systems and posture is the interconnected nature with which each part influences the other parts and contributes to the whole. Rantala, et al., (2018) explain that “All parts of the body are connected with each other, thus any force causing a change in one segment will move other segments to compensate for loss of balance in the body” (p. 24). If a change is made to one part of the system, the whole system will be changed, including if there is a change in purpose or environmental conditions. This relates to what Starr (2019) claims is the goal of somatics:

“Embodied transformation, the goal of the somatics path, means radically and deliberately changing this shape, first by becoming aware of our habitual reactions, moods, and ways of relating, and then, over time, through a holistic and comprehensive approach, becoming able consistently, even under pressure, to generate different actions in alignment with and in service to what matter to us” (p. 48).

This deliberate and consistent attunement between our posture and our inner beliefs or the things that matter to us is what I am after with this study of the syllabus, which is really a study of myself as a teacher.

### *Materials, Tools, Genres: Shapers of Posture*

There are many things that might appear to be inert things that we can merely use to accomplish a task or convey meaning through, yet these things actively shape us when we engage with them. Tools, materials, language, metaphors, and genres all have distinct properties, forms, and systems of logic that determine how they function, which in turn shapes the postures we take as teachers or artists, meaning they should be seen as active agents and not something that is innocuous, or without consequence. Donald Norman (1993) says as much in *Things That Make Us Smart*, when he states, “Each technology poses a mind-set, a way of thinking about it and the activities to which it is relevant, a mind-set that soon pervades those touched by it, often unwittingly, often unwillingly...Technology is not neutral; it dominates” (p. 243). Judith Burton (2016) makes a similar point in the following statement: “The knowledge, skills, and techniques employed by artists in their practice are also embodied in the particular properties of the materials they use” (p. 923). This implies, like Christina Haas (1996) has contended, that the material world matters and “has profound implications for the development of human culture and the shape of human consciousness” (p. 4). Haas describes technology not as an object or inert thing but as a “vital system that is bound to the world of time and space” (p. xii) which suggests that it has a certain aliveness or power to perform something which is “always inextricably tied both to a particular moment in human history and to the practical action of the human life world in which it is embedded” (p. xii). These thoughts make me believe that the tools, materials, genres, etc., we use as artists or teachers are simultaneously something we make and something that makes us.

In his seminal text *Being and Time*, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927/1962) uses the example of a hammer to illustrate the way people experience the world in a

“ready-at-hand” mode of being or when a person engages with the material world in a more routine or automatic way. When a person picks up a hammer, the purpose of the hammer is so innate that they instinctively know that the purpose of that object is to hammer, pound, or hit things and they do not really have to think about what they are doing. This is what Norman (1993) calls, “experiential cognition” (p. 16) which he claims is one of two general modes that humans function within. Experiential cognition describes when a person can function in an efficient and effortless way based on the accumulated knowledge which might be described as expert knowledge (Norman, 1993). The other method that Norman (1993) talks about is “reflective cognition” which represents the mode of cognition when a person is addressing novel situations, coming up with new ideas, and making decisions. Comparing and contrasting various options in a very conscious way is characteristic of this mode of cognition. While Norman acknowledges it can be dangerous to simplify a human’s cognitive function down to two categories because we are complex creatures, he believes it can be helpful to think of cognition in these two ways, which apparently Heidegger agrees with because he has also distinguished human behavior into two categories: “present-at-hand” and “ready-at-hand,” which is akin to Normans’ reflective and experiential modes of cognition.

To come back to the hammer, the hammer is designed to fulfill a purpose and make our lives easier. When we pick up the hammer, we don’t have to use our time and mental energy to think about the material or what purpose it was meant for, we just begin hammering. Norman (1993) believes that it was humans’ ability to make tools and artifacts that reflects the intelligence of our species. Every tool is designed with affordances and limitation that allow some behaviors to occur and limits others which will aid in the accomplishing of a desired goal or purpose (Norman, 1993). We see this play out in all aspects of our lives. We make things like

tools, maps, or genres to fulfill a purpose which gets us to the goal quicker and more efficiently. The real issue then with maps, tools, genres, language, or materials is not that they help us communicate better or fulfill a task, but that we forget what work they are doing for us. We easily fall into a mode of functioning where we overlook the way that the things in our lives are actively shaping us. Jocelyn Small (1997), a scholar of cognitive studies of memory and literary, speaks further to this point and claims that unless we have some reason to look closer, we often will just go on using tools without much thought. Simply, if there is not a break, a rupture, or some friction it is easy to overlook aspects of our being and practices that are hidden deep down and away from our conscious awareness. In this way, I have tried to manufacture that rupture by taking the posture of an artist that is playing with a material.

### ***Overlooked and Mundane Things***

I want to go back to one of the issues with posture that complicates this journey of personal attunement and that is that we are not fully aware of all the reasons we believe, feel, or act the way we do. All too often, as Martin Heidegger (1927/1962) believed, we interact with the world in a “ready at hand” mode, which is to say we function in an automatic and less fully conscious manner. We often overlook the mundane things in our lives that shape and influence our postures and somatic shape. In *Eye Chart*, a book about the chart that eye doctors use to test vision, William Germano (2017) says the eye chart is both “familiar and unfamiliar” (p. 4) and “like many things around us, the eye chart is something we don’t notice until we have to” (p. 4). Kevin Jackson (1999) makes a similar argument, only it is about the invisible forms in books like titles, dedications, footnotes indexes, marginalia, that have become commonplace and escape our attention. Germano and Jackson both speak of the natural tendency we as humans have to overlook the things we are familiar with or can easily recognize. Yet those forms have an



influence on how we think, act, and feel. As the authors, Macfarlane (2019) and Cook-Sather (2006) both point out, and as I shared in the previous chapter, things that are hidden, underground, or unseen can often have a great influence on us in the present, despite our lack of awareness.

The syllabus is one of those things that is both familiar and unfamiliar. As someone who has spent most of my life in and around schools as both a student and a teacher, I was quite familiar with the syllabus due to its ubiquitous nature in education. I estimate that as a student I have seen/read between 60–70 different syllabi throughout the duration of my academic career. This number jumps even higher if you add the syllabus-like documents K-12 teachers use (i.e., disclosure documents). This familiarity with the syllabus began as student, where almost every course began the first day by going over a syllabus which outlined what the course was about and what we as students could expect from the course in terms of workload (required readings, assignments, tests, or projects), grading policies, and other expectations like attendance. It was also an indicator as to what kind of teacher the professor was. The syllabus was often how I determined if I would take the course or drop it. My familiarity with the syllabus might even go back further to when I was in middle and high school. I remember getting a paper handed to me—a disclosure document—which is just another name for syllabus, that described the class, the expectations, grading and late policies, rules and punishments for misbehaving, and had a place where you and your parents had to sign that you had read the document and agreed to its terms (see Figure 38). As a result, early on I began to think of the terms “contract” and “syllabus” synonymously, which was reinforced when I was a middle school art teacher and my administrators would remind my colleagues and I that our disclosure documents (K–12 version

of the syllabus) were educational contracts that would protect against disagreements with parents and students.

**Figure 38**

*Example of a disclosure document with required signatures.*



**AP Biology Syllabus**  
**Signature Page**

Please sign and have your parent(s)/guardian(s) sign below after you have read the AP Biology syllabus. By signing below, you are acknowledging the requirements for this class and agreeing to follow them. I am looking forward to helping you learn at a college-level pace and increasing your understanding of biology.

Signature of Student \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name (Please Print) \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*Email \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent/Guardian \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name (Please Print) \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*Email \_\_\_\_\_

\*\* Email addresses will not be used except as a means to communicate about individual student progress. If you have questions at any time during the school year, contact Tins Doss at [tdoss@seq.org](mailto:tdoss@seq.org).

I cannot recall any specific conversation where someone defined what a syllabus was or how to make one, and it was not until I began teaching that I heard people explicitly talk about what a syllabus does (i.e., it is a teaching tool, contract, or permanent record). Over the years of engaging with syllabi, I developed a vocabulary and understanding of the syllabus, its forms, and conventions through informal experiences that taught me how to distinguish a syllabus from

other genres of writing. When I became a middle school art teacher my engagement with the syllabus changed because I was now the one crafting the syllabus. I was required to provide a syllabus to every student and their parents for every course I taught. I often dreaded this task and relied a lot on the vocabulary, forms, and traditions that I saw my teachers use while also making it my own (see Figure 39).

**Figure 39**

*Middle school syllabus*



From these experiences and from the things I heard others say, I began to shape what I thought the syllabus was and what it could do, which mostly related to the syllabus being a contract or a way to predict what a course would be like. I clearly knew what a syllabus was (an educational document that acts like a contract or teaching tool to craft a learning experience), I

knew who makes it (teachers), I knew the context where it belongs (schools), when I could expect to see one (the first day of class), and I knew what it was supposed to look like.

The syllabus was familiar in the sense that I recognized it as a distinct form or genre of educational material. When I say “genre,” I mean that I recognized the syllabus as a distinct type of writing or a class of objects whose distinctive qualities, forms, and conventions set it apart from other types of educational materials. However, as my personal narrative might reveal, genre is not merely a way to distinguish one thing from another but is an active agent in shaping the way we think, feel, and act in a specific situation. Charles Bazerman (1988), illustrates this point well in his definition of genre as a “socially recognized, repeated strategy for achieving similar goals in situations socially perceived as being similar” (p. 62). Dylan Dryer (2007), another scholar that has studied genres, states, genre is “a recognizably typified, self-reinforcing textual form that both reflects and creates the social conditions in which it is written and read” (p. 1). In both instances, Dryer and Bazerman describe genre as something that is a tool for recognition and categorization, but also functions as a social tool, meaning it (in)forms the way people think, act, and feel. In a later text, Dryer (2016) furthers this point when he claims that genres help establish and reinforce our neural pathways, suggesting that genres ought to be seen as critical active agents in shaping our thoughts, feelings, and actions, or in other words, our postures/somatic shape.

The implication here is that genres, like the syllabus, are more than just a way to categorize and divide the world into distinct sets, classes, or types of things based on a specific criterion, but are also active agents that suggest certain postures or actions that shape and determine what we do with that information. This claim is reaffirmed by what Anis Bawarshi (2003), a rhetorical genre studies scholars, said regarding the trends within genre studies, “There

is a growing sense among those who study genre that genres do not just help us define and organize kinds of texts; they also help us define and organize kinds of situations and social actions, situations and actions that the genres, through their use, rhetorically make possible” (p. 17-18). This idea originated from scholars like Carolyn Miller (1984) and Charles Bazerman (1988) who made the case that genres are more than a system to classify things but also are the mechanisms for social action to occur. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2016), provide an accurate summation of this duality in their introductory text on genres: “From this scholarship has emerged a view of genres as both social (typified, recognizable, and consequential ways of organizing texts, activities, and social reality) and cognitive (involved phenomenologically in how we recognize, encounter, and make sense of situations) (p. 3). Simply, genres are frames, ways of being, or spaces where meaning is created and they form our understandings, which means they are pedagogical in nature.

When I reflect on my personal experiences with the syllabus, I realize my mental model or vocabulary I had of what a syllabus was and the possibilities for what it could do as a material were concrete and rather limited. This narrow view of the syllabus limited the possible pedagogical gestures or postures I could take through the medium of the syllabus. I was left replicating what I’d seen my teachers demonstrate over and over. I unknowingly assumed a certain posture as a teacher when I crafted my syllabi like a contract, where I outlined the rules and penalties for breaking those rules. I positioned myself as the sole authority in the classroom and my students were positioned like powerless receptacles that were expected to comply to my rules, even though this was far from the intent and values I had as a teacher, but what else could I do, the syllabus is a syllabus, isn’t that all it can be?

It is here that I begin to answer the question of why I am so intent on understanding the syllabus on a deeper level. The syllabus is a material that shapes me as a teacher and as such I want to know what it is doing. In addition, I want to know if there are ways that this material can be made to be more flexible or more generous than the limited view I was given as a student and young teacher.

### **Syllabus and Genre**

I now make a jump to talking about the syllabus and genre. As I briefly described earlier, the syllabus is a genre, but genres are one of those things that can be misunderstood in terms of how they work and shape posture. I could probably examine the syllabus through a variety of lenses (material, tool, or metaphor), some of which I have done already, but in this chapter, I will primarily look at the syllabus through the lens of genre, particularly through the scholarship coming out of Rhetorical Genre Studies. I do this because language and written forms are the primary way that the syllabus is experienced currently. In addition, there are a variety of scholars who reference the syllabus as a genre (see Afros & Schryer, 2009; Rocha, 2020; Seitz, 2019; Snyder, 2009; Sidorkin, 2012) and some like Anis Bawarshi (2003), a rhetorical genre studies scholar, has even called the syllabus the “master classroom genre” (p. 119) because of the way it establishes the “ideological and discursive environment of the course, generating and enforcing the subsequent relations, subject positions, and practices teacher and students will perform during the course” (p. 119). As such, the syllabus can be seen as a primary agent in the shaping of teacher posture.

### ***How Genres Work***

There is some debate about how to define the term “genre,” which will inherently shape how it works and its subsequent importance. According to Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), the

etymology of the word “genre” allows for two interpretations: on the one hand, as Jamieson (1973) notes, the word “genre” is of French origin and “signifies a distinct species, form, type, or kind” (p. 162). This is where the common understanding that a genre is a tool to describe, distinguish, or categorize things comes from. On the other hand, Bawarshi and Reiff claim genre can be traced to the Latin word *gener*, meaning to generate, implying that genres are tools for meaning making. Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) state, “Part of the confusion has to do with whether genres merely sort and classify the experiences, events, and actions they represent (and are therefore conceived of as labels or containers for meaning), or whether genres reflect, help shape, and even generate what they represent in culturally defined ways (and therefore play a critical role in meaning-making)” (p. 3). As I see it, genres help us make sense of the world by providing a way to categorize and distinguish one thing from another based on a distinct set of characteristics (this thing is this, not that). These distinctions help us then know how to relate to the thing, person, or situation we are experiencing and respond appropriately (I see this thing is this, which means I should respond to it in this way). Consequently, genres (in)form the postures (thoughts, feelings, actions) we take in any given situation. This view is in line with the way Charles Bazerman (2010), who in the preface to Bawarshi and Reiff’s (2010) book *Genre*, describes genre as being at the “central nexus of human-sense-making, where typification meets utterance in pursuit of human action” (p. xi). Bazerman goes even further and claims that all, Communication, social arrangements, human-meaning-making are packaged in genre recognition. Genres are associated with sequences of thought, styles of self-presentation, author audience stances and relations, specific contents and organizations, epistemologies and ontologies, emotions and pleasures, speech acts and social accomplishments. Social

roles, classes, institutional power are bound together with rights and responsibilities for producing, receiving, and being ruled by genres (p. xi).

Genres in this sense are deeply embedded in almost every part of our lives and can be beneficial to us because they give our mind the contextual information needed to quickly identify what something is and help us determine the appropriate responses to the thing or situation we are encountering. In “Genre and the Performance of Publics” Lindsay Rose Russell (2016) aptly expresses this idea: “In colloquial terms, genres help us get over it (complexity) and get on with it (daily activity)” (p. 84). The genre is doing work for us because it makes it easier for us to readily recognize patterns and similar situations and respond in preconditioned ways established by the genre.

There is a remarkable similarity between how genres function and our physical postural system. Consider our physical posture, our body is constantly going through a complex and sophisticated exercise to coordinate its moving parts to maintain balance, which as Carini, et al., (2017) explains, happens mostly at the subconscious level. While amazingly simple on the surface, posture is a complex integrated system of equilibrium and adaptation that happens automatically and subconsciously allows us to focus on other things and still maintain a poised, balanced body position, use little energy, and prevent pain or stress (Carini, et al., 2017; Todd, 1920; Lee, et al., 2021; Whalen, 2014). Daniel Kahneman (2011), an economist who studied behavior and thinking, explains that the ability to function in this subconscious way is essential to the success of our species. Kahneman says that humans have two distinct ways of functioning: the faster system is our instinctual, quick, subconscious, or reactionary response that is based on an incredible ability to recognize patterns among the incoming stimuli and adapt accordingly; the other method is slower, more deliberate, and rational. It carefully takes in the available



information, assesses it, and compares it to previous knowledge, selects a response that is calculated and deemed appropriate, and instantaneously carries this action out. The problem with this method is that it is slow, tedious, and expends a lot of energy. This brings us back to Russell's point, genres make it possible for us to respond to complexity in the world in a more efficient manner by providing the contextual clues, patterns, and forms that help us quickly recognize the situation and adapt accordingly.

One of the critical aspects underlying genre's function is a reliance on a socially agreed upon or shared understanding of what defines a specific genre and why. Carolyn Miller (1984) claims it is essential that genres have significant similarity in form. When we make something that adheres to generic form, we indicate to others how they might understand the thing we are sharing. For example, labeling something as fiction or non-fiction will change the way someone will approach that text. When we say "syllabus" there is a common understanding that what I am talking about is an educational document that sets out key parts of the educational experience. It has a set of vocabulary, conventions, forms, and purposes it adheres to which allows for the communal understanding to emerge and become reliable. How do you know you are seeing a syllabus? Easy, "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" (Sidorkin, 2012, p. 3).

### ***How Do We Learn Genre?***

This leads to the question: how do we learn a genre and know the appropriate behavior? There seem to be two ways this typically occurs: the first is through engagement with the genre in its local context or what Etienne Wenger (1998) has described as "communities of practice." We learn the genre by watching others, picking up on their vocabulary and conventions as well

as our own engagement, both in terms of reading and writing the genre. This method comes from direct engagement with the genre artifact and may be described as a more informal practice. The second way we learn about a genre is through the “meta-genre” (Giltrow, 2002), which is the surrounding literature, guidelines, or rules that regulate how people engage with a genre. Let’s examine each of these ideas in turn.

<sup>3</sup>**Syllabus Form.** When I look back at my experience with the syllabus, I see that my understanding and vocabulary regarding the syllabus were formed through syllabi themselves. Think about the way my middle school syllabi had a line where my parents and I were expected to sign it signifying we accepted the terms described in the syllabus, which clearly communicates “I am a contract.” In other words, the form was shaping the posture I took as a student and as a teacher. In an essay exploring the syllabus as curriculum, Angela Baldus (2019) similarly proposes that the form of the syllabus is more than just a physical attribute, it invites or suggests “different ways to read, hear, see, feel them” (p. 3). In Baldus’ words, “Most syllabi, through their course outlines, dates, times, and assignments, map a course of study and suggest we follow the course in a particular way” (p. 4). As such, Baldus contends that the following beliefs about syllabi can be assumed:

1. Syllabi are informative.
2. Sometimes Syllabi are informal, but most are formal.
3. There are different ways to infer and interpret how syllabi should be read.
4. Syllabi often gesture to how they should be read (p. 5).

I was particularly interested in this idea because it poses the possibility that the physical form of the syllabus, things like the title, the distinct layout or structural elements like indented

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<sup>3</sup> I have written more extensively on the syllabus form but have chosen to give a condensed version here. See Appendix B for a more comprehensive inquiry into the syllabus form.

paragraphs, lists, bullets (see images), the language that is used like the use of future tense verbs (“we will do this,” or “Students will learn...”), or even a reading list, are mechanisms that invite a certain way of reading and responding to the syllabus, meaning it is active in shaping the experience of teachers and students.

One of the important functions of the syllabus form is the way it frames or distinguishes the knowledge that will be covered in a class and offers a course for learning that knowledge. This task of titling is a task of defining the boundary of a course, discipline, or field. Ramia Mazé (2009), in an interview about critical design, wrote, “At least in part, building a discipline is about specifying the knowledge, skills, capabilities, ideas, and interests in relation to that of other disciplines” (p. 391). For a discipline to be a discipline, it uses labels to distinguish or define itself from others—“We are this, not this.” In their philosophical examination of teaching, Biesta and Stengel (2016) reiterate this point by claiming that teachers develop curriculum to focus students' attention, enabling them to “focus on something rather than on anything or everything” (p. 35). Organizing knowledge in logical ways or summarizing information to make the tasks of readers/speakers/teachers/students easier or more efficient is important because there are many different disciplines, with classes that cover a wide range of topics; without a way to organize this information, it would be difficult to distinguish one class from another.

The syllabus can also be described as a “framing device,” which provides a border or construct to identify something or make possible a certain action or thought. In her text on new museum theory and practice, Janet Marstine (2005) discusses the idea of a “frame” and states,

Frames not only set boundaries; they provide an ideologically based narrative context that colors our understanding of what’s included. In fact, rather than isolating a work from the

wider world, framing links the two. Architectural features, lighting design, audio-tour headsets, the museum café, and the larger museum itself are all framing devices (p. 4). Essentially, Marstine is declaring the museum and things like the framing, lighting, or other architectural features as an “active player in the making of meaning” (p. 5) and calls for greater attention to be given to whose views, stories, or ideologies are being presented explicitly and implicitly through these framing devices. Similarly, how we frame knowledge through the syllabus matters and needs to be given careful consideration.

Whenever we make a syllabus, we create boundaries, which may be necessary, but inherently exclude something in order to highlight something else. In the *Power of Maps* (1992), Denis Wood makes a similar statement about maps not being able to show everything, so the cartographer must be selective in presenting a selection from the “vast storehouse of knowledge in the form of presences or absences” (p.1.). This unavoidable necessity means that “every map shows *this*...but not *that*, and every map shows what it shows *this way*...but not *the other*” (p. 1.). The problem is not so much that a map, a frame, or a syllabus distinguishes one thing from another to limit what we focus on, but that we forget that we are looking at a limited view, an arbitrary boundary, or a partial view of reality.

While some utilize framing devices as tools to control or unintentionally/intentionally perpetuate power, Wiseman, et al., (2013) have used the concept of framing as a way for leaders to shift decision-making power to others by providing context, clarifying the essential issues, and providing needed information so others can be empowered to make informed decisions. With these thoughts in mind, I turn back to the title that is placed at the top of the syllabus. This simple gesture, or any other seemingly insignificant gesture like leaving blank space in the margin or the selection of pronouns we use, makes a mark that is significant. In the case of the title, it allows

for each class to be distinguished from another. The syllabus becomes a way to define what knowledge will or will not pertain to a specific course. Its function is to focus the student and teacher's attention on the relevant knowledge that is needed to meet the institutional goals (training students for a profession, licensing, or mastery of a discipline). The syllabus is a tool to distinguish the formal (prescribed) curriculum from the informal (unregulated) curriculum. While traditionally the syllabus might be thought of as a boundary or box that sorts knowledge into categories that are relevant to the course and keeps the others out, there may be other ways of distinguishing knowledge and limiting our focus without being exclusionary or keeping certain knowledge out of education.

**Syllabus Meta Genre.** We now return to the “meta-genre” which is the second way we can learn about a genre. Janet Giltrow (2002) describes *meta-genre* as the discourse that surrounds a genre and provides explicit and implicit regulations, guidelines, or precedents “that rule out some kinds of expression, endorsing others” (p. 190) which regulate how people engage with the genre. Giltrow contends that meta-genres can be extremely durable and resistant to change, which seems partially due to the way the meta-genre controls the creation and usage of the genre form via what Anne Freadman (1994) calls “genre uptake.” Giltrow further contends that things like “rules, silences, gestures, collocates, complaints, habituated up-takes, warnings, homilies” p. 202) make up the surrounding atmosphere around a genre that functions as a social tool to maintain and guide the uptake of genres. Jamieson (1973) claims genres perpetuate institutional rhetoric “by creating expectations which any future institutional spokesmen feel obliged to fulfill rather than frustrate” (p. 165). I am reminded of all the comments, reactions, and pushbacks that I received from people when suggested the syllabus could be more than a contract or teaching tool. Comments like “The syllabus is what it is,” “That idea is interesting,

but is it still a syllabus then?” or even, “You are better off leaving the syllabus alone and focusing your energy elsewhere” reflect the way people get uncomfortable with playing with the form of our genre. These comments reveal the rigidity of the syllabus as material, or maybe more accurately, describe the limited and rigid conceptions and postures that we are conditioned to have towards the syllabus.

Essentially, the meta-genre is where people teach others the essential information that defines a genre, guides the making of, and engagement with the genre. Much of the scholarship I have shared about the syllabus and this dissertation itself can be seen as being part of the meta-genre surrounding the syllabus. This illustrates how genres function as self-perpetuating systems that endure over long periods of time. Donella Meadows (2008) describes systems as being “a set of things-people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time” (p. 2). The meta-genre and genre uptakes both explicitly and implicitly shape the behavior of those engaging with genre in a way that maintains and reifies the genre conventions, values, power structures, and goals.

The durable nature of genres might also be a result of a lack of discourse about a genre’s history and origins creating what Anthony Paré, (2002) describes as “illusions of normalcy” (p. 59) or when “The automatic, ritual unfolding of genres makes them appear normal, even inevitable; they are simply the way things are done” (p. 61). When I initially started reading the literature on the syllabus, I was surprised to find there was hardly any scholarship on the history of the syllabus and the way this academic form/genre evolved. Seitz (2019), in his article simply titled, “Syllabus,” apparently had a similar experience because he states, “I’m not claiming it doesn’t exist, but my search led almost exclusively to rather obvious tips on how to design a syllabus instead of to scholarly interrogations of its function in various approaches to education”

(p.457). It is not just Seitz or me that has stated that there is a lack of scholarship theorizing about the syllabus. Bawarshi (2003), wrote “It is curious that, as significant a genre as it is, the syllabus has received so little critical attention” (p. 120), which is also echoed by a variety of other scholars (see Baecker, 1998; Cardozo, 2006; Fink, 2012; Eberly, et al., 2001).

This claim, that the syllabus is something that we overlook and has been understudied by the field of education, might be absurd to some because there is an abundance of literature on the syllabus. For example, when I searched “What is a syllabus” in Google it brought up 1.42 billion results and when that same question was entered into Google Scholar it shrunk to 525,000 results, which is still a staggering amount of literature on the topic. However, the majority of the results, as Seitz (2019) described almost exclusively reference making a syllabus or tips for using it. It is easy to find books like Michael Woolcock’s (2006) “The Fundamentals of Course Construction,” or Peter Robinson’s (2009) “Syllabus design,” which are handbooks for teaching and instruction on how to construct a syllabus. There are many articles like Allison Boye’s (2015) “How Do I Create an Effective Syllabus?,” Wagner, et al., (2023) “Best practices in syllabus design,” Slattery and Carlson’s (2005) “Preparing An Effective Syllabus: Current Best Practices,” or Jennifer Gonzalez’s (2014) “How to write a syllabus” that instruct how to make a syllabus based on “best practices.” There are an abundance of templates, rubrics, or guides that instruct people in making a syllabus (see images). I share this to point out that the meta genre surrounding the syllabus is quite robust and it is quite instructive in terms of conveying what a syllabus is and how to make or use it, but not very helpful if you want to understand where it came from or what led to the syllabus taking its current form or the purposes that people claim for it.

If we are not careful, it may be easy to feel like a genre is a natural occurrence and has always been that way despite logically knowing that the genres are constructs created by humans arising out of specific contexts to address human needs. Without the theory or history, it can be easy to, as Randall Popken (1999) claims, assume that a genre sprang into being fully developed despite them evolving from other genres. We would do well to remember that all genres are not just random or natural occurring things, they are bound to a context and rationality that makes their “native environment” (Popken, 1999, p. 91) which shapes and reshapes their form. The ready acceptance of genres might be because we “We presume a genre has a past (one that legitimates our genre performances in the present and future)” (Russell, 2016, p. 84), and for the most part, knowing the history of a genre is not necessary for one to participate in and benefit from using a genre. Russell (2016) aptly summarizes this concern when she states, “In other words, when we focus on genres as (temporarily) stabilized social structures that “help do our rhetorical thinking for us” (Miller 1994, 72), we tend to ignore the rhetorical thinking that goes into genre invention itself ” (p. 85). Russell’s comment is significant and complicates the idea of personal agency and autonomy of individuals because these systems or forms we use are doing some of the thinking for us, even if we are unaware or ignorant of them. Likewise, Jacques DéSautels and Marie Larochelle (1997/1998) claim, “Whatever the field involved, established knowledge does not emerge out of nowhere; it serves as standard-bearer for those who have developed it, representing their epistemological postures and their social positions” (p. 2). This means that genres and the choices one makes about genres reflect the context, positionality, and values of those using them. This also means that if we want to understand genres, we need to understand the contexts, pressures, and needs that shaped the genre form.



Seeing the syllabus as a tool for making meaning and as an active agent that (in)forms the postures that teachers take suggests for a greater attention being given to understand the contexts and motivations behind the syllabus as a genre. This is precisely what Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) contend in their introduction to their text “Genre,” when they state:

Such a dynamic view of genre calls for studying and teaching genres beyond only their formal features. Instead, it calls for recognizing how formal features, rather than being arbitrary, are connected to social purposes and to ways of being and knowing in relationship to these purposes. It calls for understanding how and why a genre’s formal features come to exist the way they do, and how and why they make possible certain social actions/relations and not others. In short, it calls for understanding genre knowledge as including not only knowledge of formal features but also knowledge of what and whose purposes genres serve; how to negotiate one’s intentions in relation to genres’ social expectations and motives; when and why and where to use genres; what reader/writer relationships genres maintain; and how genres relate to other genres in the coordination of social life (p. 4).

Russell (2016) makes a similar call to study genres in their context and before they become laminated or concretized into a form that is an illusion of reality. This is what I have been trying to do in this dissertation, to understand the syllabus by looking at it more intently and the contexts, pressure, and needs that have shaped it into what it is.

### ***Genre & Context***

As contexts or needs change, genres change, or as Russell (2016) puts it, genres are constantly invented and reinvented in response to the “emergent common exigence or a swelling recurrent need” (p. 87). Russell further states that when “Faced with new ideologies, situations,

settings, technologies, or needs, rhetors look to and draw on the rhetorical resources of prior genred experiences” (p. 87) implying that new genres are in some way just an older genre or what Jamieson (1975) calls “antecedent genres.” This principle aligns with the concepts that Piaget (1954, 1969) discussed when he said that children use prior knowledge or schema to make sense of new stimuli. Sometimes those schemas do not accurately fit the situation or lead to an equilibrium with the world, necessitating a change in the child’s schema. The inclination for using genres to make meaning of the world feels innate.

When we are faced with a new situation, we often use preexisting models or genres to make sense of it. In her article, “Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint,” Kathleen Jamieson (1975) gives a great example of this exact thing when she talks about the inaugural state of the union address that George Washington gave in 1790 to the United States Congress. At the time, the United States was a fledgling country that had just revolted from the British Kingdom and the country’s new leaders were attempting to create a new government, constitution, and culture based on democratic ideals. Jamieson explains, “Having successfully rebelled against the mother country, the colonists sought actively to divest themselves of the customs of monarchy, for many of them feared that the new government would assume a monarchical form” (p. 411). However, as much as they tried, the antecedent genres of their past, the colonial forms, and ways of speaking kept creeping in. This is evidenced in the “state of the union,” an address given President George Washington to congress where he gave an update on the state of the country and proposed the new legislation for the upcoming legislative session. This whole concept is remarkably similar to the “Kings Speech,” which was the speech the King of England gave at the beginning of a new parliamentary session and established a program for new legislation. It may not be surprising then to hear that Washington’s speech was quite similar in form and rhetoric to

the speeches King George III gave. William Maclay (1927), claimed, "It is evident from the President's speech that he wishes everything to fall into the British mode of business" (as cited by Jamieson, 1975, p. 412). Despite the intentions of George Washington and other leaders to be their own new country, when faced with a similar rhetorical situation, Washington unintentionally used the rhetorical forms and posture of the person who he had just revolted from. As Jamieson (1975) contends, antecedent genres "are capable of imposing powerful constraints" (p. 414) meaning "the past may abide as a living presence" (p. 406). So, while genres can be useful tools that help us communicate and navigate new and familiar situations, they inherently bring some values or forms from their past which may or may not align with the goals or values of the current user.

If you reflect back to the previous chapter where I shared a variety of examples of things that were called a syllabus, you will recall the first form was a title slip or tag that was affixed to a scroll or container indicating its contents. I assume this practice began in response to the need to easily find certain scrolls and identify the contents without having to unfurl the scroll and read the text. When the multipage codex or book became a thing, it inherently created a new challenge for readers. There would be a need to determine what is in a book without having to read the whole thing, thus the table of contents emerged. It took the preexisting genre of syllabi and adapted it to a new need. This pattern seems to continue. When a lecturer needed a way to indicate to potential listeners what they were to speak on, they created a list and called it a syllabus. It seems logical to call the list a syllabus because like the title slip or table of contents, it indicates what the lecture was about or its contents. Again, it took the antecedent and used it for a new situation. That change set a new precedence because the syllabus was used to indicate what would happen in the future instead of indicating what something was after it was already

made. When we look at each of these examples, we can see how the makers of the syllabus relied on prior models of the syllabus to solve an emerging need, which inherently shapes the syllabus into a slightly new form.

I suggest that we think of the syllabus as a genre or system that has “an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something” (Meadows, 2008, p. 11). We can come to understand that system by studying the parts. In addition, Meadows argues that one of the key concepts in systems theory is the idea of “bounded rationality,” which was first thought of by the economist, Herbert Simon (1957). Bounded rationality theorizes that people make reasonable choices based on the information they have and the contextual factors or systems they are a part of. If one wants to understand a behavior or why a system behaves the way it does, one needs to look at the whole of the system and the context it functions within. So, each variation of the syllabus across time represents an intentional decision to make or use the syllabus for a certain context or tension that the makers of syllabi were facing at the time. The shifts that happened over time seem to adhere to principles of “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1957) or moments when someone used an “antecedent genre” (Jamieson, 1975) to address a novel situation, leading to some innovation taking place.

### ***Current Educational Context***

As I shared in the introduction chapter, education is often a disputed space, particularly when it comes to determining the purpose of education. Generally, the purpose of education falls into four categories: vocational, the preparation for a future career; social, the preparation to participate in a complex society and its various demands; intellectual, the learning of academic skills and general knowledge; and personal, the development of character, personal responsibility, talents, and self-expression (Spring, 1991; Goodlad, 2004; Gage, 2009; Brint,

1998; Reese, 2000). While speaking about the current trends in education, Luke, et al., (2013) contend that since 9/11 and the global financial crisis there are two purposes driving curriculum debates in education: (1) education should contribute to the “growth and global competitiveness of domestic human capital and economy, and (2) national and regional social cohesion, affiliation and security” (p. 1). As a result of these goals, education is focusing more and more on the development of “universal skills and knowledges” (Luke, et al., 2013, p. 4) that schools can transmit and assess through standardized instruments. Luke, et al., (2013) argue these trends have led to education becoming more and more concerned with outcomes that can be “behaviorally observable” and “measurable” (p.4). Kalin (2012) has made similar observations and contends that the current purposes in education are trending towards an era of standardization, institutionalization, and instrumentalization that embraces authoritarian models of learning that focus on producing tangible results that adhere to the logic of economics and little else. These kinds of trends are not new, as evidenced by Michael Apple (1979/2018) who claimed that education has been using over specified and directive syllabi since at least the 1970’s to turn education into a package material akin to an instructional script that anyone could enact.

It shouldn’t be surprising then that the form and meta-genre surrounding the syllabus reflect these same trends. In my literature review I found consistently that the syllabus is seen in three basic ways, which are the three purposes that Parkes and Harris (2002) found for the syllabus: the syllabus as a contract, a teaching/learning tool, and a permanent record. I have spoken about these previously, but I want to briefly look at these concepts again in relation to the current educational environment.

The syllabus is commonly described as a contract (Rubin, 1985; Parkes & Harris, 2002; Thompson, 2007; Snyder, 2006; Baecker, 1998; Bain, 2004; Germano & Nicholls, 2020, Seitz, 2009; Neaderhiser, 2016; Kauffman, 2015). Thinking of the syllabus as a contract suggests that we think of education as an exchange and the syllabus is the social agreement that helps people interact in a way that is beneficial for both parties. Fenstermacher (1986), illustrates this interaction in the following diagram:

1. There is a person, P, who possesses some
2. content, C, and who
3. intends to convey or impart C to
4. a person R, who initially lacks C, such that
5. P and R engage in a relationship for the purpose of R's acquiring C (as cited by Biesta & Stengel, 2016, p. 30).

In this line of thinking, the syllabus becomes the agreement between the teacher and student and establishes the knowledge or skills that will be transferred, in addition to the particulars that will guide the exchange. It might be worthwhile to point out that the teacher almost exclusively has the power to determine what goes into the syllabus and some teachers even hold the belief that it is their right and responsibility to make all decisions represented on the syllabus (Parkes & Harris, 2002). This idea of using a contract in education to establish the expectations, responsibilities, and roles of students and teachers likely came from the early examples of syllabi when it was used to indicate the contents of a scroll, book, or what someone was going to lecture on. If you went to a lecture that was supposed to be about one topic but then the lecture spoke on another, I would imagine you might be upset and feel misled. The syllabus as contract then seems to relate back to the basic need of finding a way to communicate about what things one

could expect from a teacher, class, or other experience and ensure that interaction is mutually beneficial.

Building on this point, Rubin (1985) argues the concept of a syllabus as contract or social agreement can be good because it creates a “place of meeting” (para. 16) or shared community of values. For Rubin, the syllabus as contract can be a powerful tool if it is oriented towards establishing common shared ground and expectation for all involved, which suggests there should be flexibility for both sides, students and teachers, to have power in the shaping of the agreement. Parkes and Harris (2010) strongly advise the careful crafting on the syllabus because poorly written or unclear expectations lead to grievances according to their experience, “if it is clearly written, organized, helpful, appropriately humorous, thoughtful, and perfect in style and grammar it conveys to the students that the instructor values these qualities. A syllabus that is contradictory, sloppy, misleading, and incomplete models a lack of respect and of care which the students may well resent or even emulate” (p. 58). While Parkes and Harris set an almost impossible standard of crafting “a perfect” document, they make a point that the crafting of the document has a significant influence on students and teachers.

The other two purposes, syllabus as teaching/learning tool and syllabus as permanent record, also seem to fit well with the model that Fenstermacher (1986) described. The syllabus can go beyond being the contract that sets expectations but can also teach students and aid them in this process of acquiring the desired knowledge or skills. The syllabus indicates not only what knowledge or skills a student can expect to gain in a class but outlines the course of actions the student should take in this process. The syllabus communicates to students the important questions or themes to pay attention to, addresses common questions or concerns, and helps students understand what they need to do to be successful in the class (Parkes & Harris, 2002). In

other words, the syllabus is a tool that helps instruct students on how to succeed within the classroom or educational world that was established by the teacher. It can outline a course of action that one could follow to gain certain knowledge. It reminds me of the way early syllabi, like the table of contents, indicated to readers how they could use the table of contents to navigate a text, or the way the Syllabus of Errors provided references for where a person could go to learn more, which again instructs readers on how to seek knowledge. One of the distinctive characteristics of the academic syllabus is that teachers provide tips, instructions, and expectations for how students should learn, approach the class, and succeed.

The syllabus is often seen as a permanent record of what was taught, despite it frequently being written before a class has even begun. As Snyder (2009) points out, the syllabus can be a document of record that accurately describes how students spend their time in and out of class, making it a great tool for accreditation, evaluative process, and accountability of teachers in general. In some ways, it acts very much like a contract in that teachers are expected to adhere to it, which is what makes it possible to use it as a record. I am reminded of the way the table of contents, or the title tag indicates what is contained in a text or scroll. I suppose the table of contents or title slip could have been made first, but I think it is more likely that those things came after the scroll was made or the text written. In that sense they stand as a record of what was written. In any case, each of these categories leads to education being seen as an exchange and uses language that orients towards business or legal transactions, things that can be observed and controlled.

When we look at contemporary syllabi, we see these ideas reflected in the forms and vocabulary. Look at the following syllabus template (see Figure 40), it is extremely formulaic and attempts to ensure that every syllabus looks and functions the same. There are many



occurrences of words like “must,” “right,” or “appropriate” which suggest there is one right way of doing things. It indicates that goals should be measurable and recommends using language like “Students will be able to...” to describe outcomes, which makes it clear that the point of the course is to achieve a very specific goal or outcome and the syllabus/teacher’s role is to ensure that goal is met.

**Figure 40**  
University syllabus template

The figure displays two pages of a university syllabus template. The left page is the front page, and the right page is a continuation of the syllabus content.

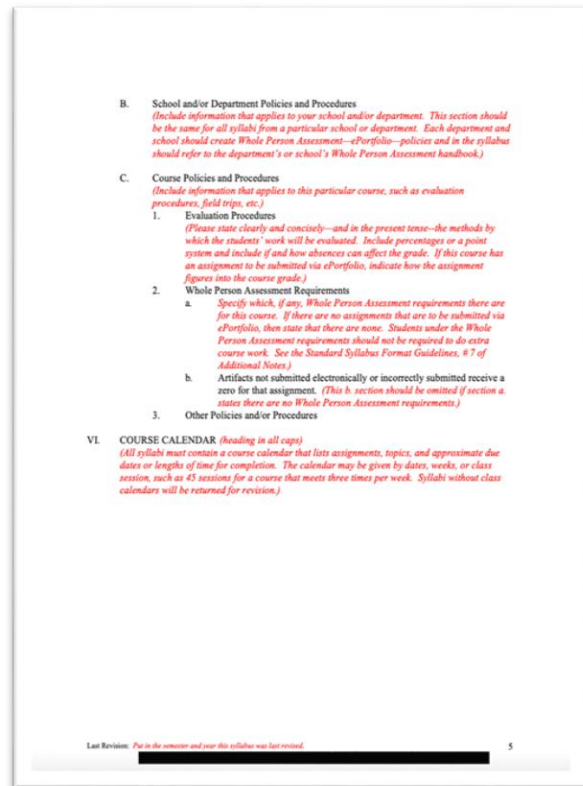
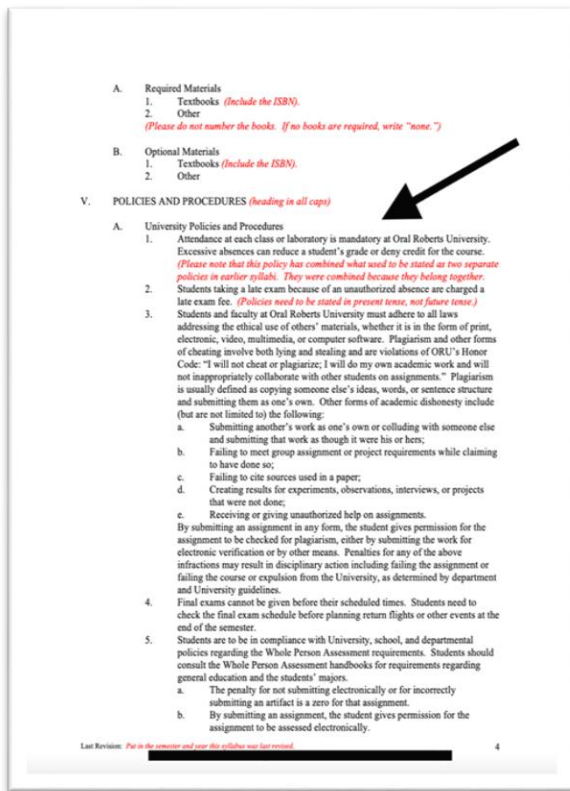
**Page 1 (Left):**

- Syllabus for**  
**Course Prefix and Number–Course Name (bold)**  
Credit hours  
Semester Year
- I. COURSE DESCRIPTION (heading in all caps)**  
(Course description must match the course description (including prerequisites, etc.) in the ORU catalog, available online. Course descriptions that are new or are changed must be approved by the University technical editor to insure that they comply with standard course description style. Additional course description information on the syllabus may be included in a second paragraph that does not appear in the catalog. Please leave a blank line between paragraphs but not before the prerequisites.)  
**Honors Distinctives:** (If this syllabus is for an honors section of a course, include a paragraph here that explains how the honors section differs from the regular sections of the course. Differences might include the kinds of assignments or perhaps a service learning project. Avoid vague comments such as “a more in-depth discussion.” Make sure the Course Policies and Procedures section–Y, C.–later in the syllabus reflects what is done in the honors section of the course.)  
**Prerequisites:** (If no pre- or corequisites are required, write “none.” Include technical skills requirements.)  
**Fees:** Add approved fees, if any, and correctly identify them as “Lab fee,” “Course fee,” etc.)
- II. COURSE GOALS (heading in all caps)**  
(Give a brief description of the goals and purposes of the course, such as “The purpose of this course is to provide . . . , or enable the student to . . . .” Words such as “understand,” “learn,” and “comprehend” are appropriate in this section.)
- III. STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR THIS COURSE (heading in all caps)**  
(State the objectives—what you expect the student to be able to do or exhibit as a result of taking the course—in measurable terms. You may want to break down the objectives into terminal and unit objectives or simply list all objectives together. Try to avoid redundancy.)  
**Terminal Objectives**  
As a result of successfully completing this course, the student will be able to do the following:  
(List the things the student will be able to do, using measurable terms like “calculate,” “read,” “present,” “express,” “discuss,” “list,” “match,” “write,” etc. Avoid vague terms that cannot be measured, like “know,” “understand,” “learn,” “study,” and “comprehend.”)  
1. List the . . .  
2. Discuss how . . .
- B. Unit Objectives**  
(Terminal and unit objectives may be combined into one section called “Objectives.”)  
As a result of successfully completing this unit, the student will be able to do the following:  
1. Write an essay showing . . .  
2. Present a speech using . . .

**Page 2 (Right):**

- C. Objectives for Students in Teacher Preparation Programs**  
(This applies only to courses used in teacher preparation programs, such as elementary education, secondary education, and special education. NOTE: In the past, this section was included as part of the Goals; however, because they are technically objectives, please move them to this part of the syllabus.)  
The Teacher Preparation Program meets the competency-based requirements established by the Oklahoma Commission on Teacher Preparation. This course meets the following competencies: Subject Competencies (SC) (List the specific number and competency of each of the competencies taught in this class.)  
This course is designed to help students meet subject competencies:  
SC 5: Understands the link between child development, curriculum, and instruction.  
SC 10: Understands the selection and use of materials, resources, and technology appropriate to individual differences.  
SC 11: Creates an environment that facilitates learning experiences which make subject matter meaningful to students.)
- IV. TEXTBOOKS AND OTHER LEARNING RESOURCES (heading in all caps)**  
(List the required and/or optional textbooks required for the course and include the ISBN for each book. If no texts are required, state “none.” Please use a standard documentation style (APA, MLA, CBE, Turabian, etc.) for this bibliographic information, and if your department has adopted a variation, feel free to use it. What is important is consistency within your department. We cannot expect our students to document correctly if we don’t.)  
**Single Author Examples**  
APA Rodriguez R. (1982). A hunger of memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez. Boston: Godine.  
MLA Rodriguez, Richard. A Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez. Boston: Godine, 1982.  
CBE Rodriguez R. 1982. A Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez. Boston: Godine. 218 p.  
Turabian Rodriguez, Richard. A Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez. Boston: Godine, 1982.  
Chicago Manual of Style Rodriguez, Richard. A Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez. (Boston: Godine, 1982).  
**Multiple Author Examples**  
(How the authors are listed varies by documentation style. The remaining information (title, etc.) follows the same format as the single author entries above.)  
APA Smith, S. R., Eckland, K., & Houser, J.  
MLA Smith, Stephen R., Kyle Eckland, and Janine Houser.  
Turabian Smith, Stephen R., Kyle Eckland, and Janine Houser.  
Chicago Manual of Style Smith, Stephen R., Kyle Eckland, and Janine Houser.  
CBE Smith, Stephen; Eckland, Kyle; Houser, Janine.

Figure 40 (contin.)



## Counter Narrative

As I shared in the last chapter, it is natural for alternative norms or counter discourses to emerge in response to the genres and norms of the dominant groups within a communal space, allowing for individuals to take oppositional identities. There are counter discourses that exist both in the discussion of the purposes of education and in relation to the syllabus. Luke, et al., (2013) are some of the scholars that have become worried by the way that curriculum planning and policy have trended towards more accountability and prescriptive curriculum that deprofessionalizes the field of teaching and limits what is possible in the classroom in the name of consistency, rather than providing greater access, equity or justice. Luke, et al., (2013) further contend that the syllabus, like other curriculum documents, has become a space where the institutional powers can constrain, delimit, and prescribe what is taught and how, as well as

surveil and enforce what happens in a classroom. While addressing trends in teaching in the UK, Biesta, et al., (2014) make a similar note of the way teacher agency or the ability for teachers to be active in shaping their own work and conditions is being eroded by the increased use of prescriptive curriculums, standardization, testing, and inspections that essentially deprofessionalize the field of education. DéSautels and Larochelle (1997/1998) simply describe what is happening as the favoring of what Foucault (1975) called "schemas of docility" which condition one to readily accept the established knowledge (p. 2). For these scholars, education is being flattened and compelled to use methods that emphasize the observable, measurable, and controllable outcomes in the name of standardization and efficiency.

In Sara Wilson McKay and Melanie Buffington's (2013) text on research methodologies, they say the current educational climate is a compliance culture, which can leave teachers feeling powerless. Biesta and Stengel (2016) acknowledge this same idea and claim the "current regimes of accountability" (p. 55) leave teachers demoralized. They go on to say,

What are the relations supported in such a system? It seems that teachers are sandwiched between principals whose job is apparently to tell them if and when they are good enough and students who may or may not be ready and willing to demonstrate what they do know on instruments that seem designed to seek out what they do not know. Instead of privileging teachers' judgment, such a system disempowers teachers and diminishes their professional prerogatives. Principals and teachers are working at cross-purposes, and teachers are encouraged to treat students as objectives of intervention only. The indeterminacy that is intrinsic to teaching is disregarded in favor of a causal view of teaching and learning (p. 58).

The irony of this is that standardization and automization in schools has been shown to lead to a variety of adverse outcomes like plateauing test scores, the deskilling of teachers, and a wider disparity in the achievement gap (Luke, et al., 2013; Abedi, 2002; Nichols, et al., 2005; Lee, 2006; Smith, 2007).

If we return to the three purposes of the syllabus: the syllabus as contract, syllabus as learning tool, and syllabus as permanent record, there is an existing discourse that challenges these ideas. For example, In the article, “Having Students ‘Sign the Dotted Line’: The Implication of Treating the Syllabus as a Contract,” Neaderhiser (2016) contends that seeing the syllabus this way places teacher and students into a non-negotiable and adversarial agreement. In addition to setting the terms of the contract or what goes into the syllabus, teachers often “reserve the right to alter the schedule” or elements of the syllabus based on their discretion (Parkes & Harris, 2002, p. 56), yet students are not afforded the same privilege. Thompson (2007) further argues that the syllabus as contract relies on asserting teacher power to enforce the contract, which can alienate and dehumanize students and convey the message that learning is more about following rules than anything else. Most professors implementing the syllabus as contract have good intentions at heart and may be attempting to create a beneficial social agreement for both students and teachers, but in practice it can be embedded with hidden power and oppression (Apple, 1979/2018; Young, 1971). Baecker (1998) in “Uncovering the Rhetoric of the Syllabus,” studied the use of rhetoric of the syllabus, specifically the use of pronouns and found teachers do a bad job of negotiating power in the classroom as evidenced in the heavy use of pronouns that hide power and attempt to create a false sense of solidarity. The coercive “we” is one such example, we “is a rhetorical device that allows the speaker to distance themselves from whatever is being said, thus making it more palatable because it appears to come from the

group as a whole” (p. 59). A teacher might say “we will do this,” but what they really mean is “you will do this”. Baecker (1998), citing Mulhauser and Harre (1990), said, “It is, as it were, as if the ego hides his or her intentions and desires in an anonymous mass” (as cited by Baecker, 1998, p. 59). For Baecker, a balanced syllabus is not one where balance is shared but made explicit and appropriately using the phrases “I will do”, “you will do”, and “we will do.”

Another problematic implication of seeing the syllabus as a contract is the way it simplifies the complexity and relational aspects of teaching and learning down to a mere contractual agreement. It turns education into a commodified market system of exchange. The “banking model” (Freire, 1970/2000) of education, which treats knowledge as something that can be transferred from teacher to student has been challenged by various scholars, especially those ascribing to constructivist views of education (see Freire, 1970/2000; Dewey, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; hooks, 1994). However, Kauffman (2015), while acknowledging that the syllabus does not constitute a legally binding contract, believes it doesn’t hurt to maintain the contractual mentality when building a syllabus: “Thinking like a lawyer” helps a teacher have consistent classroom policies and foster a student-teacher relationship that is “less authoritarian and more collaborative” (p. 191). There are some that take issue with seeing the syllabus as contract because it implies that it is a legally binding document, based on legal precedence, but it is not (Neaderhiser, 2016; Deans, 2019; Rumore, 2016; Kauffman, 2015). For some like Seitz (2019), seeing the syllabus as a legal contract is problematic because it blinds us from seeing the syllabus for what it really is, an “implied statement of pedagogical philosophy” (p. 458). Neaderhiser (2016) echoes this sentiment: “When the syllabus is “contractualized,” it is reduced to a singular purpose that erases the rhetorical complexity and multiple purposes that are part of the syllabus’s nature as a genre” (pp. 1-2).

On a different note, Hockensmith (1988) claims that when teachers use an overly planned syllabus it is associated with “rigid patterns of instructor behavior and unresponsive-less sensitive attitude towards students” (p. 348). Similarly, Bain (2004) argues professors can use the syllabus to control what questions, knowledge, and processes of learning are valuable without consideration of students’ input. As a result, students feel they have little control resulting in grade attention and not taking responsibility for their learning. In the podcast, *How to Build a School*, both Kerry Murphy (Briggs, 2022b) and Jess Thom (Briggs, 2022a) illustrate the way education centers around a one-size fits all method of learning that marginalizes those who learn differently or have neurodivergence. Just like Hockensmith and Bain point out, a heavily prescribed and narrow syllabus created by teachers will often result in negative learning outcomes for students. Alternatively, Hockensmith (1988) argues that students who have more involvement in making decisions regarding their learning have better learning outcomes. Consequently, Hockensmith advocates for syllabi to be flexible, responsive to student needs, and accommodate change based on student input. Bain (2004) supports this position and further advocates for a syllabus that does more to explain the rationale for making decisions and opens a conversation about the nature and progress of learning with students. Bain and Hockensmith seem to be suggesting that at times we might think we are using the syllabus in a way that benefits our students, but it actually becomes an impediment to their learning. While having a structure and clear plan can be important for a teacher, it needs to be adaptable and include students in order to have better learning outcomes.

Another blaring problem with seeing the syllabus as a contract or permanent record is the assumption that it can predict or control what is learned by students. One of the main reasons this is problematic is because the syllabus is written before the course has even taken place. In

essence, the syllabus as permanent record relies on teachers sticking to that document and the assumption that students will learn what a teacher teaches. Parkes and Harris (2002) elaborate, “a syllabus will function as a permanent record only if it is an accurate description of what a particular course entailed at the time it was offered” (p. 57). Habanek (2005) further supports this position by stating that the integrity of the syllabus, which accreditation and department alignment relies on, depends on the teacher’s ability to follow the proposed syllabus. So, either teachers will have to stick to a proposed syllabus to maintain integrity, possibly ignoring the needs of students, or diverge from the proposed document necessitating a revision of the document or not worry that their practice aligns with the syllabus. Words like “must” and “will” are common throughout a syllabus and reveal the way the syllabus is thought to be a tool to shape and control what is taught and learned. Postman and Weingartner (1969) suggest that what students learn is not necessarily the content that teachers believe they are teaching. In fact, they argue, the way we teach is the curriculum that is learned, meaning that if we try to compel students to learn, they might be learning more about power, assimilation, and compulsion. Thompson (2007) acknowledges that student perspectives and student involvement in both the creation and research regarding the syllabus is woefully lacking.

Within this discourse there is a lot to consider regarding the syllabus as contract and the implications it has for teacher posture. However, all of this discourse points back to the essential purpose of the syllabus, which is a social agreement or tool that aids the interactions between teacher to students, teacher to teachers, teacher to administrator, or teacher to public. Maybe there are ways this idea could be reimagined that stays true to this purpose but allows different postures that are less oppressive or problematic.

### ***Power of Genres***

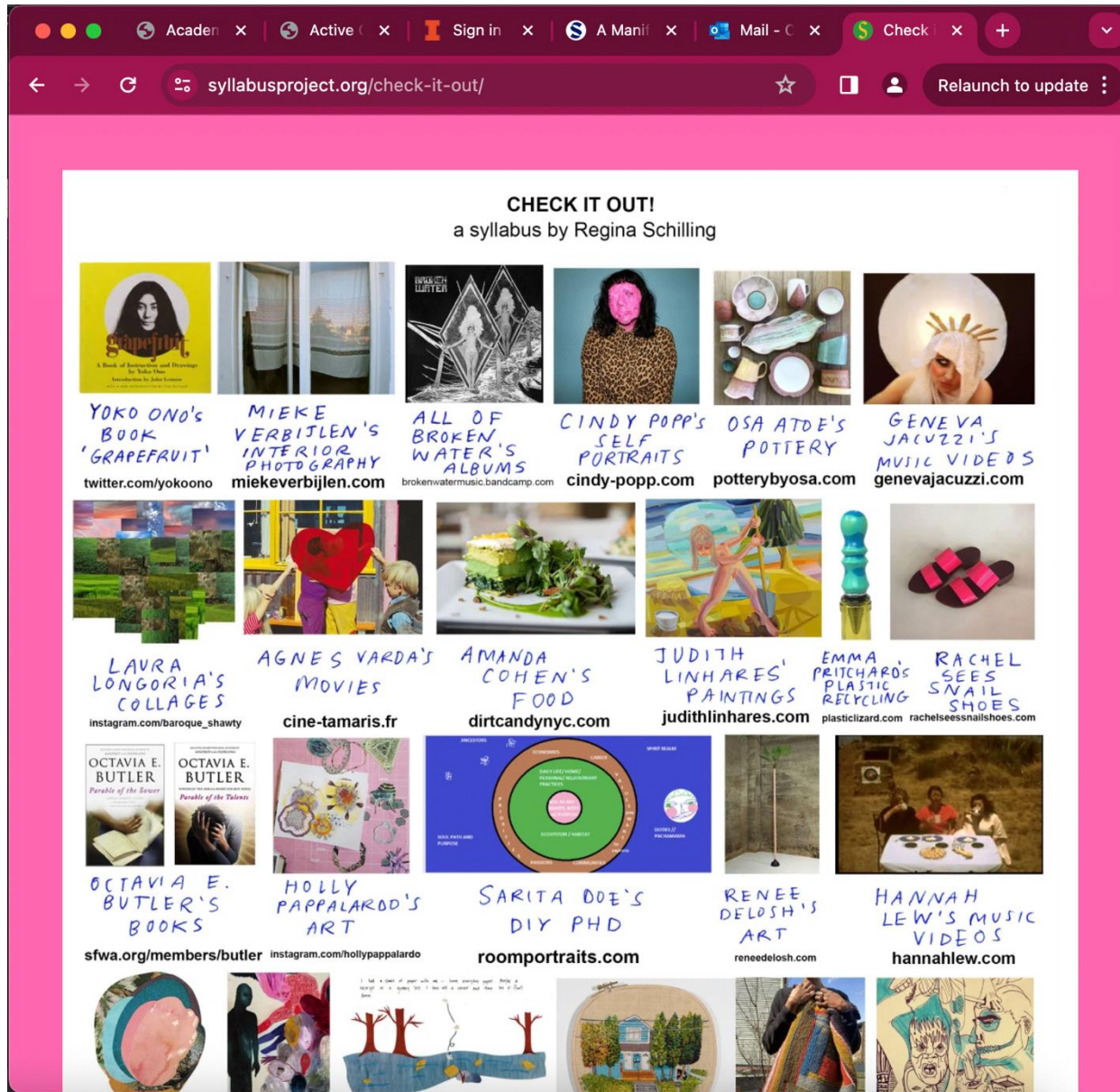
Genres are important and powerful agents that shape us, their users and creators. It is not just the creation of the genre artifact that is important but the discourses that happen in the meta-genre. The meta-genre is a place of power because it is there that those with power can shape what a genre is and does by defining the implicit and explicit conventions, protocols, and rules, that dictate the uptake of the syllabus. I think about the expectations, guidelines, requirements, or things people gave to me that explicitly or implicitly taught me what the syllabus was and how I should make it. For example, my principal would remind me that the syllabus was a contract, and as such, would protect me from any disputes with disgruntled parents. She advised that I should clearly state my rules, policies, and teaching practices so parents and students knew beforehand what they could expect and that I should also adhere closely to the things I laid out in the syllabus. In fact, the syllabus form and meta genre are so effective in instructing us in how to think and act in educational spaces that in the absence of a syllabus we are unfazed and still know the appropriate behavior to take, what forms of communication we should use, and how to fulfill the correct social roles or expectations. For example, Regina Schilling (2021) created a syllabus for the Syllabus project that only has the words “Check it Out!” at the top of the page, immediately followed by “a syllabus by Regina Schilling.” Then there is a grid of twenty-nine images accompanied by a name and a website (see Figure 41). I found myself looking at this list of artists not as a random list, but as a curated list; one that had pedagogical intent. The author didn’t provide any contextual information to suggest there was a lesson, theme or goal in mind for me to learn, but I instinctively knew this list was purposely selected, implying the author had a goal or intent behind selecting what she did. Why did I find myself doing this? I think it is because I have been trained by my experience with syllabi to expect there to be intent behind the readings that a teacher assigns. In my experience, teachers often choose the readings because



they bring up key questions, themes, or dialogs that are essential for the learning in that course. By simply placing the words “a syllabus” combined with the directive “Check it out!” I immediately responded in the preconditioned way to look for the meaning, the rationale, or pedagogic intent.

**Figure 41**

*Regina Schilling's syllabus, 2021*



To further illustrate this point, I want to share a statement that I came across in a syllabus for an art education course I took last year. The syllabus began with a standard introduction paragraph of the course, but then we get this standalone phrase immediately after: “Don’t be fooled by the fact that you are holding something that looks and feels like a syllabus in your hand. We will be making this course up as we go along” (Travis, 2020, p. 1). I had no memory of this from when I took the course a year ago, but was shocked in the rereading of it. I read it as commentary on the way the form of the syllabus has been engrossed in conventions and traditions that dictate how students/teachers are conditioned to behave with the syllabus, specifically in this case, how students are traditionally excluded in the making or designing of a course, yet in this example, the teacher is seeking that kind of input. In essence, the professor seemed to suggest that the traditional form, with its conventions and practices, was not going to be followed, subsequently presenting a new form for the syllabus, one that can be made with students.

Another story. In the process of interviewing for a job recently, I was talking to the hiring committee about my research with the syllabus when one of the committee members told a story relating to the syllabus about a professor he had at a prestigious art school. One day in class, one of the students raised their hand and asked the professor if he had a syllabus for the course so he could know what they would be doing for the rest of the semester (Apparently the professor had not proffered a syllabus to students, despite it being the middle of the semester). Annoyed, the professor grabbed a piece of paper and wrote something like “make art from now to the end of the semester” and pinned it to the wall and said, “There is your syllabus. Are you happy now?” I am not really sure why this committee member shared this story but it is intriguing. One could conclude that the syllabus is not that important because the students and teacher, besides the one,

were getting along fine in the course without a syllabus. However, I would argue it is more likely that the students and teacher are so accustomed to the conventions of the classroom that they were not concerned by the lack of a syllabus because they knew what they could expect in terms of their roles and expectations.

While anecdotal and built on speculation, I began to wonder if it possible that when we do not have a syllabus, we rely on an engrained memory of a syllabus that enables us to reliably navigate the educational spaces we occupy. Maybe the syllabus is there even if we don't make one. The professor makes decisions about the class. The students show up and perform the student role. The danger is that without the physical syllabus, the important decisions about curriculum and pedagogy are hidden from sight. We will unconsciously rely on the models that are in place. I guess this is my point. We have a history and a genre provided to us, which we rely on. We can begin to engage in a genre without considering where it came from, what remnants are there from other genres, who this genre works for, and what it is doing to us. This is what I call the *afterimage syllabus*, like when you stare at the sun and then close your eyes it seems like the sun is still there despite your eyes being closed. After so many exposures to the syllabus, we have that image burned into us.

This view of the syllabus as a powerful agent in shaping posture contradicts the view that I previously had of the syllabus being something that I mostly ignored after the first day of class aside from the occasional glimpse when I needed to be reminded of an important date or reading assignment. Something in my experience with the syllabus has led me to see the syllabus as being mundane, innocuous, and bureaucratic. Perhaps, as Samuel Rocha (2022) suggests, it is the way we write or conceptualize syllabi that leads to them being seen of relatively little import:

In fact, it is my present view that it is just as plausible to suppose that one reason few students really *read* the syllabus today could be because the syllabus document, as a genre, is so often written precisely not to be read, to be scanned or mined for surface information. If professors were to write their syllabi to be read in a manner that is consistent with what we expect from students in the courses the syllabi belong to, perhaps we would have better results (p. 119).

Maybe it is our nature to overlook certain forms and genres because they are mundane, ubiquitous, and routine. In *Invisible Forms*,” Kevin Jackson (1999) makes such a case and argues that certain literary forms go almost unnoticed, things like titles, dedications, footnotes, indexes, and the marginalia. These forms escape our attention, despite being right in front of us and shaping the way we read and understand texts. Germano and Nicholls (2020) nailed it when they titled their book on the syllabus, *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document that Changes Everything*. This “almost invisible bureaucratic document” (Germano & Nicholls, 2020, p. xx) could—in fact—be an active agent in shaping the ideologies, postures, and experiences of those involved in education, meaning it merits greater attention despite its seeming mundaneness.

The real issue with genres is the way they silently shape the way we act, think, and feel but we don’t even realize it. This brings me back to a part of human nature, that Banaji and Hunt observed, “without promptings from outside of one’s own world there is often no reason to ‘pause to reflect’” (as cited by Small, 1997, p. 7). When I think back on that moment in my graduate class where Jorge Lucero, gave my classmates and I the assignment to make a syllabus and said we could interpret what “syllabus” meant, it was the figurative moment when the head of the hammer fell off or when the syllabus as a genre was revealed to me. The key was Dr.

Lucero saying, “interpret that how you will,” this statement may seem inconsequential, but it was thing that caused me to stop and say, “What does he mean? Is there more than one way to interpret what a syllabus is? Is it possible for the syllabus to do something beyond being a contract or tool to describe an educational course?” This moment was a rupture and marked when the syllabus shifted to being “present-at-hand” to me. It was the first time in my experience where what a syllabus was or could be was left open and did not conform to the typical form.

### ***A Need for Openings, Disruption, or Friction***

The functioning of the body’s postural system happens mostly on a subconscious level. There are a few exceptions though, when my posture shifts from my unconscious mind to my conscious awareness. Those moments usually happen when there has been an event of maladjusted posture or when my posture failed to carry out one of the biological goals like maintaining balance, staying upright, or being pain-free. These moments of disequilibrium mark a moment when the body’s natural mechanisms were maladjusted to the environment, causing a stumble or other undesired outcome. One such moment happened to me recently when walking to school.

I walk to school frequently, and as a natural consequence, I am subjected to all kinds of weather. On this particular day, I was experiencing typical Midwest gusty winds. As I was being buffeted by strong winds, I instinctively began leaning forward into the wind to keep from being blown over. As the wind blew harder, my angle of tilt became more pronounced. However, there were moments when the wind abruptly changed or stopped, and I stumbled forward for a brief moment before my body adjusted to the change. There was never any thought on my part that directed my body to lean forward when the wind was stronger or straighten when it lessened; my body just did that on its own. Posture is like this. While so simple, there was a whole set of

stimuli, impulses, actions, and counteractions that took place, instantaneously altering my positioning according to the changing wind conditions. The body does an incredible job of maintaining balance most of the time, so it is easy to forget it is doing all of that. It was only in those few moments when the wind changed so fast that my body could not react fast enough and I stumbled forward that I even recognized the way my body was naturally positioned to counter the force of the wind. For the most part, our body adjusts in ways that we aren't even aware of unless there is some reason for us to become more conscious, like my stumbling. These moments of maladjusted posture or conflict between our expectations and reality caused by the disequilibrium between our posture and environment can cause us to become aware of our body's posture.

Likewise, genres by nature exist in the space of the mundane. They are meant to be tools that allow us not to think with the deliberate or conscious part of the brain, instead allowing the subconscious part of the brain to take over by recognizing patterns and situations and then automatically taking the appropriate actions. By default, genres lead us to overlook or not pay attention to what we are doing, unless there is some sort of disruption, friction, or failure. In some regards, this is very helpful, but it can also be problematic because we may not fully realize the messages we are communicating through our actions or postures. This is why Dylan Dryer's (2016) concept of "disruptakes," which Dryer defines as the "uptake affordances that deliberately create inefficiencies, misfires, and occasions for second-guessing that could thwart automaticity-based uptake enactments" (p. 70) are so important. Dryer goes on to explain the importance of these inefficiencies, misfires, or second guessings: "Delays—even of minutes—could offer citizens and planners alike the chance to perceive a fuller range of discursive and cultural resources as germane to the discussion but which their long habituation with the

conventional has made, neurologically speaking, hard to perceive as relevant or appropriate” (p. 70). In other words, “disruptakes” disrupt the uptake of genres in a way that hinders our brain from recognizing patterns in our brain, causing the conscious portion to become activated, which allows us to be more reflective and deliberate in our actions and ensure our actions align with our values. This is the same core idea of somatics according to Starr (2019) who claimed that the goal of somatics is to become more aware of one’s whole self and through reflective exercises become more deliberate in aligning one’s shape to the values they care about most. Starr calls, these moments of disruption “openings” or the “destabilizing and disorganizing of the current shape to allow more life and feeling to move through the organism” (p. 55). It is through these openings or disruptakes that we become aware of our teacher posture, which can be difficult to see at times, and carefully attune ourselves to be aligned to our education values.

The form of the syllabus and the meta-genre surrounding the syllabus are active agents that shape our understanding of the syllabus and as a result shape the posture or ways a teacher will approach learning and teaching. Amy Devitt (2017), while speaking about the syllabus as genre, said “genres reflect and shape their contexts” (para. 3) meaning that something as simple as what’s included or not in a genre is “a powerful statement about what — or who — matters” (bolded section after para. 4). Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) share a similar view of the syllabus and claim it is powerful because it transforms “the physical space of a classroom into a socially bounded, ideological space marked by course goals, policies, assignments, and course schedule” (p. 80-81). On another occasion, Anis Bawarshi (2003) called the syllabus the “master classroom genre” (p. 119) because of the way it establishes the “ideological and discursive environment of the course, generating and enforcing the subsequent relations, subject positions, and practices teacher and students will perform during the course” (p. 119). Similarly, Luke, et al., (2013)

claim the syllabus and its “technical form” is important because it is “the locus of curriculum authority” (p. viii). The syllabus as genre than cannot be overlooked or written off as being inconsequential because it is an active agent in shaping the vocabularies, practices, and postures that both students and teachers take toward the learning process. Sometimes the genre makes it too easy to only see one preset way of teaching. What we need then are new sets of vocabularies and permissions that enable new postures and a new “way of talking that makes different ways of thinking possible” (Dryer, 2007, p. 12).

With these thoughts in mind, I turn back to some of the ideas I shared in the previous example. If we only see the syllabus as an academic genre then we are limited to the conventional forms and purposes for the syllabus (a contract, teaching tool, or permanent record). Attached to these conventions are ideologies about the nature of learning, the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, even ideas about who can teach and whose knowledge is valuable. However, if we can buy into the argument that there is a more expansive view of syllabi that is defined by the essence, then the academic syllabus is just one manifestation or way of manifesting that essence. Each manifestation will address the core essence in a unique way, which is significant because it opens up new thought or gives new permissions for new postures to be taken by teachers, yet still stays true to the essence or core purposes the syllabus as a genre was created to fulfill. Let’s look back now at some of these examples and see how they open new possibilities.

### **Syllabi Permissions**

In the last chapter, I proposed that we define and recognize a syllabus not by its form alone but by the essence or what it does. I argue that for a syllabus to be a syllabus, it has to have three components: (1) The syllabus functions as a way to distinguish one thing from another. It



says, “This is this, not that.” It is a framing device, box, line, or boundary that identifies what knowledge is valued and sought after. As such, it has a curricular nature to it. (2) The syllabus relies on a tangible form that acts as a communicative device that invites or suggests how those interacting with the syllabus should behave or interact with it. How that form is made, exists, and is experienced by others matters and has a hand in shaping how people relate to it. In this way, it has a pedagogical nature to it. (3) There is an explicit or implicit relationship established between the maker of the syllabus and the future reader or user, whether it is the maker themselves or someone else. There is a certain level of implicit trust in this relationship that is connected to the perceived goal or positive outcome. Thus, it is relational.

As I have tried to illustrate in the preceding sections, over the past 80 years, certain conventions in terms of who, where, and why a syllabus is made have developed which have concretized the syllabus into the academic form we are familiar with. However, many of the examples I shared in the last chapter play with these conventions in a variety of ways. Some of them challenge the traditional notion of who makes syllabi, some change the form, while others keep the form of the academic syllabus but remove it from the educational environment which changes what it does. All of them have the essential qualities of the syllabus but go about them in their own unique way, which opens many permissions for new thoughts or postures to be taken while still achieving the purpose of the syllabus. As I share some of the permissions I have found in these examples, you might see other permissions that come from your own experience. I encourage you to pursue those and get lost to some degree, because that is what I have found to be so enriching about thinking of the syllabus in this expanded way.

### ***Permissions About Who Can Make a Syllabus***

**Permission #1: The syllabus can be made by anyone, not just professional teachers.**

Traditionally the syllabus belongs to formal institutions of education and its creation is reserved for the professor or teacher, though administrators and governing boards can also have some sway in what goes into a syllabus. There are even some professors that feel it is their right and responsibility to be the sole creator of the syllabus (Parkes & Harris (2002). This seems to come from the belief that a teacher is a person with expert knowledge on a topic and so they are the ones best suited to construct a course of learning about the topic. Unintentionally, we internalize that the creation of a syllabus goes with authority and power and thus it should be reserved for those in positions of power within the authorized or official institutions of education. When we look at the history and the evolving forms of the syllabus, this notion is shattered.

Julia Gunnison and Gillian Waldo's "Syllabus Project," the #syllabus movement, and Evgeny Morozov's webservice that creates weekly personalized syllabi of readings each challenge the idea that only a professional teacher can write a syllabus. When Julia Gunnison and Gillian Waldo, the creators of the Syllabus Project, began requesting and publishing syllabi from others, they opened up the possibility that anyone can be an expert of something, and anybody can write a syllabus that offers a course of learning to others. For example, Bettina Makalintal, one of the authors who has a syllabus published on the Syllabus Projects website is a writer/journalist. Each syllabus contributor has a small bio hyperlinked in their syllabus which reveals that the creators of these syllabi are artists, fermenters, gardeners, editors, voluptuaries, publishers, programmers, vegetarian cooks, cultural ideators, cinematographers, internet imaginers, competitive board-gamers, worriers, daydreamers, taxonomists, normies, zine enthusiasts, amateur queer historians, textile artists, and many more. It is these non-teacher

identities and professions that have enabled them to acquire the expert knowledge for their subjects that include the following:

“Five Ways to Cook an Egg” (Makalintal, 2021),

“How to Fall Down a Rabbit Hole” (Burke, 2023),

“Taking an Internet Walk (Chang & Tjalve, 2023),

“Miniature Appreciation 101: or, Sweating the Small Stuff” (Freeman, 2023),

“[Redacted]: A Syllabus on the Unsaid” (Ammann, 2023),

“Selling Sex, Work, and Literature: Then and Now” (Qualls, 2023),

“Where Does Decay Come From?” (Spicknall, 2023),

“Notes on K-pop, or, can we all just admit that NewJeans outsold your fave?” (Dingsun, 2023).

In short, being a human person who is living, breathing, and experiencing life qualifies you to write a syllabus. This leads to a new permission.

**Permission #2: When anyone can write a syllabus, then any knowledge can be considered valuable.** Because syllabi typically live in academic spaces that have very specific values and goals, the knowledge or curriculum they teach will be selective as well. However, when the syllabus is taken out of this context and allowed to be used by anyone, as is the case with the #syllabus movement or the Syllabus project, then people can offer courses of learning for a variety of topics that may typically be overlooked or excluded in traditional education spaces (think back to the list of syllabi from the Syllabus Project that I just shared). The #syllabus movement invites anyone to use the open and democratic nature of the internet to create their own syllabus that gives space to the topics that they are interested in or have expertise in. There are #syllabi that address social justice/racial topics (see #Blkwomensyllabus,

#BlackIslamSyllabus, #ColinKaepernickSyllabus, What To Do Instead of Calling the Police: A Guide, A Syllabus, A Conversation, A Process, and Schomburg Center's Anti-Racism syllabus). There are #syllabi for topics about immigration and colonialism (See #ImmigrationSyllabus, Puerto Rico Syllabus, Schomburg Center's diaspora and internationalism syllabus) There are others about monuments (see Schomburg Center's monument syllabus), Donald Trump (see Public Book's Trump syllabi), the Israel/Palestine conflict (see JSTOR's Israel/Gaza syllabus), and rape culture (see Public Book's Rape Culture syllabus). Some of these topics may align with the goals of traditional educational spaces or already exist there, but many of these syllabi represent knowledge, stories, and perspectives that many schools will not or cannot talk about for a variety of reasons whether that be political or prejudice of those in charge.

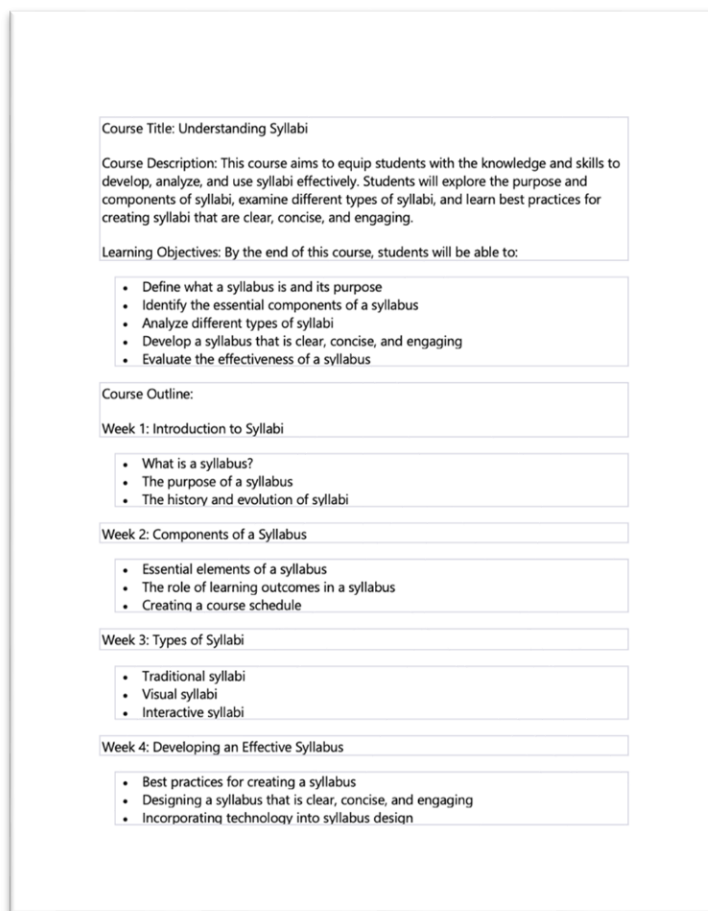
**Permission #3: The syllabus Can Be Made With Machines.** With the creation of machine learning, artificial intelligence, coding, and algorithms, a new world of possibilities has opened up in terms of syllabus creation. No longer is it just humans who can make syllabi, but machines. Evgeny Morozov, the founder of "The Syllabus" creates weekly personalized lists of readings, videos, and podcasts, using "artisanal automation" or a mix of humans and machines (The Syllabus, About Page, n.d.). The machine part utilizes algorithms to search the internet for potential sources, then a group of human curators select from these lists the topics that seem most relevant and refreshing according to the preferences of each subscriber. The machine becomes a collaborator in the creation and is like having a dedicated assistant that is constantly scouring the internet looking for things that connect to the ideas that are important to the user.

The emergence of AI programs like Chat GPT take this a step further. When prompted, Chat GPT can produce a very good standard academic syllabus for just about any topic (see image). As a result, the idea that only a teacher with expert knowledge can create a syllabus

begins to falter because these AI programs have access to the internet, which is like giving them access to millions of experts on a topic. There are some issues with programs like AI regarding accuracy, ability to fabricate answers, and ethical concerns, but it doesn't negate the possibility that even machines can write syllabi.

**Figure 42**

*Syllabus made by Chat GPT*



**Permission #4: Machines can be Collaborators in the Formation of our Ideas about the Syllabus.** When I became aware of Chat GPT's availability for public use I wanted to see what it could do, so I began asking it questions about the syllabus. I got typical answers about the syllabus being a contract or a learning tool. When I asked it to write a syllabus, as I previously

shared, it produced a very generic syllabus. Then I switched my approach and began to ask Chat GPT to write poems about the syllabus, which resulted in the following:

A syllabus is a road map, To guide us through the year, It tells us where we're headed,  
And what we'll learn, so clear.

Like a compass or a GPS, It points us in the right direction, It shows us all the stops we'll  
make, And how we'll reach perfection.

The syllabus is like a journey, A path we'll all embark, We'll learn and grow and  
challenge, Our knowledge will leave a mark.

It lays out all the objectives, And the rules we must obey, It tells us what we'll study, And  
what we'll do each day.

So let us follow this road map, And chart our course with care, With the syllabus as our  
guide, We'll reach our destination fair.

I found these to be quite interesting and enlightening as they reveal some of the views that  
people have about the syllabus being akin to maps, guides, or travel directions. I then thought I  
would go more abstract by asking Chat GPT to write haikus:

Curriculum guide,  
Learning pathways unfold here,  
Wisdom blooms with time.

Mandatory rules, lines  
Educational syllabus  
Learning, growth, and hope

Oh syllabus, guide me  
Lessons to be learned and shared  
Knowledge forever

Books open wide  
Pages, chapters, syllabus  
Knowledge now unfolds.

Endless pages teach,  
Syllabus in neat folders bound,  
Knowledge in confines.

Bad syllabus

Confusing language,  
Deadlines all over the place,  
This syllabus sucks.

Vague and unclear words,  
Expectations left unknown,  
Lost without guidance.

Vague assignments given,  
Confusing instructions lead,  
Lost students, no guide.

I was thrilled by the direction these haikus were going, but I took another step off the path of convention by asking Chat GPT to write haiku's using a targeted term with a random term:

Syllabus with bananas,  
Structured learning or chaos?  
Taste of both in class.

Syllabus in hand,  
Assignments like ripening  
Bananas await.

Syllabus of class  
Loaded with assignments, but  
Bananas bring calm.

Syllabus awaits,  
Bananas on my mind now,  
Learning and snacking.

Syllabus in hand,  
Bananas on my mind too,  
Learning is fruitful.

Syllabus explodes.  
Dynamite of knowledge shared,  
Learning blasts anew

Syllabus dynamite,  
Explosive knowledge awaits,  
Ignite our learning.

Syllabus in hand,

Dynamite of knowledge sparks  
Explosions of growth.

Syllabus so slow,  
Latent with knowledge to show,  
Learning in due time.

Slow syllabus waits still,  
Latent knowledge within hides,  
Patience to unfold.

Syllabus unfolds,  
Time crawls by in sluggishness,  
Learning at snail's pace.

Syllabus unfolds,  
Slowly, like autumn leaves fall,  
Patience is a must.

Syllabus reveals,  
Genres to explore and learn,  
Words come alive now.

Syllabus, my guide  
Genre, my companion true  
Learning never dies.

Syllabus in hand,  
Structure, rules, and expectations,  
Learning path is set.

Syllabus in space,  
Floating in cosmic vastness,  
Learning without bounds.

I was being silly when I asked Chat GPT to write a haiku about the syllabus using the word bananas, but the strange thing is that out of that absurdity these amazing poems genuinely moved me. Because of them I was moved to think differently about the syllabus, especially this idea of learning and the syllabus being connected to the ripening of fruit or the idea of slowness, patience, and latent knowledge.



We might ask, who is the author? Is it Chat GPT (an artificial intelligence), the people that wrote the code for the AI, the people whose ideas create the data that the AI is pulling from, or me, the person who gave the prompt? It is all of them. These poems are products of true collaborations, which means that not one of those entities could have produced those poems on their own. But why do I share this with you? This illustrates that only certain types of knowledge or learning experience can be accessed or created when education is open to collaboration. I do not know if I would have ever arrived at these thoughts on my own. In other words, collaboration and seeing the syllabus as something that can be made with machines enabled me to see beyond my own experiences and thoughts and arrive at a new uncharted place. The sum is greater than the parts.

**Permission #5: Anything, even Nature can Make Syllabi, Meaning Anything Even Nature can be a Teacher.** In the previous chapter, I proposed that a game trail or path left by an animal could be seen as a syllabus. I made that claim based on the expanded definition of a syllabus that relies on the essence as the defining criteria. It is also supported by the permissions that I have been sharing about who or what can make a syllabus. Seeing game trails as syllabus might be a stretch but maybe it is not that unreasonable considering that we already commonly accept that a syllabus can be a map, path, or trail (Germano & Nicholls, 2020; Rumore, 2016; Hockensmith, 1988; Warner, 2018; Westbury, 2008). Using a reverse logic then, we could say a path, map, or trail is a syllabus. Maybe, the trick is about our perception, if we treat the path or game trail as a syllabus it becomes a syllabus, making it possible for a deer to be our teacher. But what is opened to us by this approach?

This could allow for nature to be our teacher. Janine Benyus (1997) advocates for such a thing in *Biomimcry: Innovation inspired by nature*, where she proposes that we humans adopt a

mode of learning she calls, “biomimicry,” which is the process of learning from nature by imitation. Benyus states, “Unlike the industrial revolution, the Biomimicry Revolution introduces an era based not on what we can *extract* from nature, but on what we can *learn* from her” (p. 2). In this line of thinking, Benyus claims there are a few basic ecological laws that govern nature that we should learn from, “the most irrevocable of these laws say that a species cannot occupy a niche that appropriates all resources—there has to be some sharing” (p. 5) or else the community will eventually be destroyed. In other words, nature thrives on diversity.

Let’s consider the way a natural ecosystem like the prairie works. According to Benyus, the prairie has some species of plants that bloom early in the spring and then give way to species that bloom later in the summer. There are nitrogen-fixing plants that return essential nutrients to the soil, benefiting the growth of other plants. Nature relies on a cast of diverse species knowing and performing their specific role within the ecosystem to maintain balance and health. If we compare this to the way humans raise crops it is quite different.

Benyus explains that instead of balance and diversity, humans have opted for increased production, eliminating mixed species groupings, narrowing genetic diversity, and gutting the health of soil. We have replaced perennial species with annuals and swapped indigenous species with exotic. Many of the current farming systems are monoculture crops instead of the more natural polyculture. As a result, she claims, we got higher yields but many of the species cannot reproduce or pass traits onto the next generation, they need more watering, tilling, pest control, and artificial fertilizers to survive. One of the saddest things is the loss of diversity. Benyus claimed that there used to be thirty thousand different varieties of rice in India alone that were tailored to thrive in a variety of conditions and lands but were replaced with one hybrid variety.

Thinking of a deer or prairie as a teacher might sound odd, but when I think of the lessons that can be learned it doesn't seem so odd. The deer trails are created by the deer addressing basic needs for water, food, and shelter. Maybe that can remind us that even though we humans live in a different environment, we too have basic needs like Abraham Maslow proposed in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation." Benyus (1997) succinctly offers the following lessons we could learn from nature:

Nature runs on sunlight. Nature uses only the energy it needs. Nature fits form to function. Nature recycles everything. Nature rewards cooperation. Nature banks on diversity. Nature demands local expertise. Nature curbs excesses from within. Nature taps the power of limits (p. 7).

When I see those things, I cannot help but think those are the lessons we need. They seem like the antithesis of the trends in education towards "excessively technocratic exercises and forms of standardization that have become customary in higher education" (Graham, 2010, p. 126). As education trends to the standardized, measurable, observable, controllable, or predictable (Luke, et al., 2013; Kalin, 2012; Apple, 1979/2018), it feels like it is an ecosystem most aptly described as a monoculture. Cooperation, diversity, curbing of excess, and limiting of power are things that seem unheard of in the political climate we live in. Now more than ever, we need to think more broadly about who can teach us, because nature seems like a pretty great teacher. Letting go of the idea that a syllabus is created by professional teachers only, is really about the possibility that anyone or anything can teach us something. What happens when we believe anyone can teach? We allow for all kinds of knowledge, expertise, stories, and perspectives to have value free from the hierarchies that exist in most educational spaces. Imagine a world where every person wrote their own syllabi, what would they be like? What would my children's syllabus be? What could

we learn from those syllabi? I find thinking this way makes me look at each person, plant, animal, even something like a fire ring as something that has something to offer and that I could learn from. These permissions create postures that are more open, more generous, and more receptive.

### *Permissions for How to Make a Syllabus*

As I make a shift to looking at some of the permissions that are offered regarding how to make a syllabus, I am beginning with a permission that hovers between this group and the last. Thinking more generously of who can make a syllabus extends permissions for how the syllabus can be created.

**Permission #6: Syllabi can be created collaboratively with Learners.** Traditional convention tells us that teachers make the syllabus, not students. Some people might feel uncomfortable with the idea of students making a syllabus because there is a deeply embedded belief that teachers have knowledge and skills that makes them experts and it is this knowledge they are expected to pass to their students (Habaneck, 2005). This idea is connected to what Paulo Freire (1970/2000) called the “Banking Method” (p.72) of education, which is when knowledge is treated as something that a teacher can easily transfer or “deposit” into the students, as if they were empty receptacles, which clearly delineates the student as a powerless object the teacher controls.

Having said that, there are instances of teachers taking a more collaborative approach with syllabi and inviting students to negotiate or participate in the decision-making process (see Grunert, 1997; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Eberly, et al., 2001; Kaplan & Renard, 2015; Cardozo, 2006). The idea of negotiating the syllabus with students aligns with the view that the syllabus is a contract and by allowing students to represent their concerns and interests, the contract can be

more beneficial to both parties. For example, Kate Carté (2020), a professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, asks her American history students to select according to their interests the topics that will be discussed and order that they will do them. Carté began her courses by presenting a timeline of the key concepts and events of American history and then would give her students surveys periodically over the semester in which the students selected the topics most pertinent to them. Carté would then select readings that addressed those topics. In this way, Carté has found that students become more attuned to the nuances and complexity of history, have richer dialogs in class, and are more thoughtfully engaged throughout the course.

Another example that grants permissions to students being involved in the making of the syllabus comes from Remi Kalir's (2002) practice of providing students with an annotated syllabus. When Kalir shares his syllabus, he includes the following:

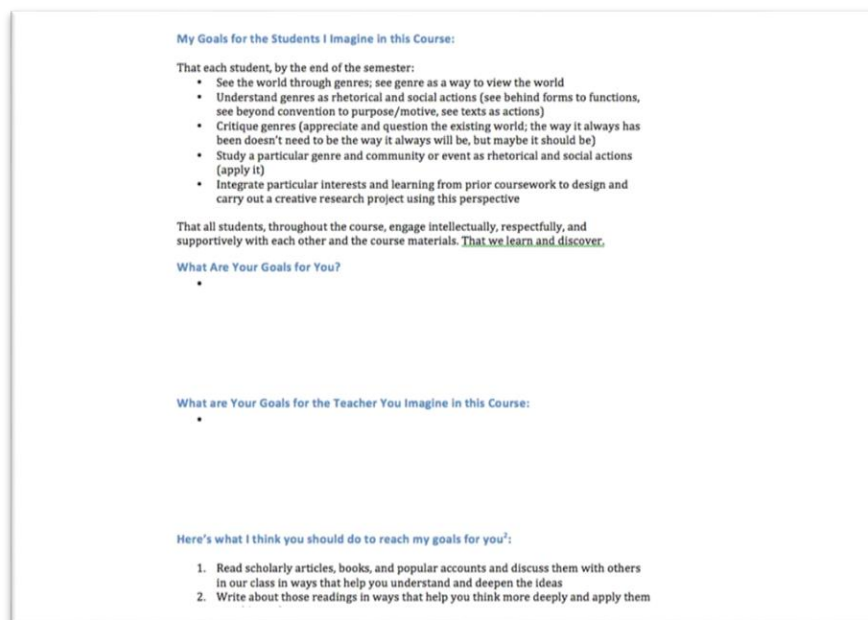
Welcome to our Annotated Syllabus. This syllabus—like our course—is incomplete without you and your commentary. This Annotated Syllabus is the start of a conversation about our course, your learning, and shared accomplishment. We will annotate our syllabus by: Asking clarifying questions; sharing opinions about readings and assignments; noting confusions and uncertainties; responding to policies; providing advice; and reflecting on what works and what can change. While your annotation may be critical, let us strive for commentary that is inquisitive and constructive. Your ongoing thoughts are welcome anytime so that this syllabus documents our learning together this semester (My Annotated Syllabus Statement section, para 2).

By giving students an annotated syllabus in a Google Document format, Kalir invites students to make comments, respond to things he has shared, ask questions, and make suggests or amendments. Amy Devitt (2017) takes a similar posture in her syllabi by leaving space to insert

student names as the starring cast, space for students to insert their own goals or outcomes, and space for students to express the goals or expectations they have for her as the professor (see Figure 43). In both cases, the professors clearly indicate to students that the syllabus is not a fixed contract or something that they have to simply agree to or abide by but is something that they can make with their professor.

**Figure 43**

*Amy Devitt's syllabus, 2017*



The Syllabus, the web company that Evgeny Morozov created, is another example that gives permission for syllabi to be created with the learner. The personalized syllabi are the result of the user setting their preferences, the machine automation, and human curators all working in collaboration.

The interesting question then is, who is making the syllabus? Is it the machine algorithms, the human curators, the subscriber who indicates the topics they want to learn about? Who is in charge in this situation? The answer is this syllabus is created in true collaboration and was made

by all of the parties working together. I like the way the user is allowed to designate what things they are interested in, but the curator is also allowed to use their knowledge and access to suggest readings they feel are important in the realm of the user's interest. It allows for dialog and a more horizontal relationship than other models of interaction.

What if all our syllabi were created like this? What if students were given a way to indicate what topics they were interested in, the medium in which they wanted to learn, and even how they wished to assess their learning? What if students' first assignment was to propose their own syllabi in response to the one provided to them by the professor? What if we expected students to show up on the first day of class with their own syllabi? Could students even create their own syllabi?

For Germano and Nicholls, the authors of *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything*, the answer is no, "They [students] almost certainly aren't ready to write their own syllabus (p. 94), despite the way they reject so many other conventions regarding the syllabus. Maybe this belief is a matter of practicality. Teachers write a syllabus to indicate to students what will be taught and what the class will be like. The lecturer who creates a list of topics they will speak on and shares that with potential listeners. The author of a book creates the table of contents for readers because they know what is in the book because they wrote it. Maybe it is simply because we don't know what we don't know, that is why the student is taking the course. Others may say students cannot make a syllabus because if students made their own syllabus, it might not be rigorous enough, address the right content, or achieve the institutional goals and criteria needed for accreditation. I can imagine a scenario where students create their own syllabi, but it would require that we let go of the idea that a syllabus must spell out the content and reading of the course. The syllabus then would be about describing how

someone wants to learn, rather than what is to be learned. More than anything else, the idea of students creating their own syllabi is problematic if the teacher is excluded from the process. The reverse is also true, if the student is excluded from the process, it's also problematic. What I find fascinating about these models is the way they open up possibilities for the relationship between students and teachers to be more horizontal and collaborative. They are not teacher-centered or student-centered but some dynamic dance between the two, leading to times when the teacher may yield to their students, or the students may yield to their teacher.

**Permission #7: The syllabus can be made at the beginning, remade in the middle, and made at the end of a course.** The crucial permission granted by these examples is that the syllabus is something that can be made and remade, which allows students to become part of the process. Traditionally, the educational syllabus is made before a course begins and is widely expected to be handed out to students on the first day of class and is typically designed to encompass the entire duration of a course (i.e., 16-week semester). In Jennifer Sinor and Matt Kaplan's (2010) guide to making a syllabus they illustrate some of these ideas:

The syllabus—what students eagerly await on the first day; a record of the class; one of the only artifacts to remain after the students move on. Your syllabus represents both an end and a beginning—a final product of your course planning and a valuable way to introduce yourself and the course to your students. Because your syllabus is one of the few formal, tangible links between you and your students and because it will be referred to throughout the semester, time and energy should be spent on constructing your syllabus (p. 18).

I am skeptical of Kaplan and Sinor's belief that students eagerly await a syllabus on the first day, however, I find the idea of thinking of the syllabus as a valuable artifact that is both a beginning



and end quite poetic. I love the idea that the syllabus could be a tangible link that connects teachers and students and the learning journey, but this leaves a question in my mind: How can it be a beginning and end if we only create the syllabus before a course begins? Maybe, they are suggesting that the syllabus is something that can be made and remade with students.

In my experience, the syllabus is typically constructed before a course begins and after the first day, is usually not referred to again except to look at a schedule or specific policy. For the most part, there is an expectation that the teacher will adhere to the plan they outlined in the syllabus, which is reinforced by the belief that the syllabus is a contract and permanent record. The syllabus as permanent record or contract relies on teachers sticking to what they outlined in the syllabus because as Parkes and Harris (2002) claim, “a syllabus will function as a permanent record only if it is an accurate description of what a particular course entailed at the time it was offered” (p. 57). Habanek (2005) further supports this position by stating that the integrity of the syllabus, which accreditation programs and university departments use to determine what was taught, depends on the teacher’s ability to follow the proposed syllabus. Teachers are then required to adhere to a proposed syllabus to maintain integrity, possibly ignoring the needs of students, or diverge from the proposed document, necessitating a revision of the document or causing misalignment between what actually happened and what was written in the syllabus. The ideas of the syllabus as contract and permanent record appear to come from the same philosophical beliefs about education being predictable and controllable, which underlie many of the current trends in education (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; Smith, 1999, 2008; Eraut, 2000; Dewey, 1916/2009; Kalin 2012). The prevalence of words like “must” and “will” in syllabi reveal the way the syllabus and education are thought to be tools to shape and control what is taught and learned.

As I previously mentioned, these ideas might be problematic because they suggest that learning can be fully understood, predicted, and controlled. Yet, as Parkes and Harris (2002) observe, many teachers will “reserve the right to alter the schedule” (p. 56) or change assignments based on their discretion (Parkes & Harris, 2002, p. 56) because they understand that there is an emergent quality to good education. In his text “Indwelling between two curriculum worlds,” the curriculum scholar, Ted Aoki (1986/2004) contends that teachers must dwell in between the “curriculum as planned” and “curriculum as lived.” Aoki’s concept of “indwelling” is essentially a way of saying that there needs to be a way to allow education to address both the institutional and planned goals or outcomes for education as well as the needs, desires, and goals of students that emerge in the learning process which cannot be planned for. In other words, there is a need for education and the syllabus to be something that is both planned and made before a course begins and that can change and respond to what happens during the learning experience due to the individual needs of students. The examples I have shared like Morozov’s “The Syllabus” or Kalir’s “annotated syllabus,” give permission for the syllabus to be alive and emergent because space has been made for learners to make amendments to the syllabus, making it an evolving and negotiated agreement, a living contract.

There is already some precedence for the syllabus being made or remade at moments other than the beginning of a course. When the syllabus was first conceived as a title tag, summary, abstract, or index for a book it functioned as a communicative tool in the past tense. For example, a table of contents is created after a book is written and the contents are known and aids readers in assessing what is contained in the book. In the case of a title slip for a scroll or container, the syllabus would only fulfill its purpose if what was contained in the box or scroll that matched the description on the tag. If a different scroll was placed in the box, it would

necessitate the tag being updated. Likewise, if a syllabus is meant to document what was learned, then doesn't it also need to be updated throughout a learning experience to better indicate or accurately describe the learning journey of students?

Along these lines, Sharon Hockensmith (2008) suggested that a syllabus could be designed for a shorter duration, going against the idea that a syllabus should stretch for the duration of an entire semester. Hockensmith argues that making separate syllabi for shorter durations allows a teacher to be more responsive to the emergent curriculum and to be more collaborative with their students. Similarly, Germano & Nicholls (2020) contend that the syllabus can be oriented towards a different model of time than just strict linear progression. Germano and Nicholls see the syllabus as a tool that disciplines and establishes how a teacher and students spend their time together, which led them to ask, "Can you build a syllabus that understands time?" (p. 50). They discuss two types of time: *Chronos* and *Kairos*. According to John Smith (1969), *Chronos* is typically associated with a quantitative understanding of time where time is used to describe duration as represented by questions like: 'How fast?', 'How frequent?', 'How old?' (p. 1). *Kairos*, on the other hand, is more qualitative and focuses on the context or the "right time" for something. Smith (1969) writes, "Kairos is, therefore, peculiarly relevant to historical action and to historical enquiry because it points to the significance and purpose of events and to the idea of constellations of events yielding results which would not have been possible at other times and under other circumstances" (p. 2). The concept of time associated with *Kairos* is reminiscent of the types of learning that some might describe as "aha" moments (Lucero, 2021a, p. 5), or what Germano and Nicholls (2020) describe as "Pedagogical nicks of time" (p. 52).

These are the moments, based on the right situation or context, when a concept or idea clicks or makes sense, where one gains an understanding that was previously unreachable. We might hear people say something like, “After that I could never see it the same.” Another way to describe these moments is as “living curriculum” (Lucero, 2021a, p 4) or the learning that happens over a longer time and lies latent until something causes it to emerge later on. Jorge Lucero (2021a) spoke about this “living curriculum” in his keynote presentation for the faculty at the University of Florida titled, “A Collage of Dissonance: 18 minutes on Universal Learning Outcomes.” Lucero, using ideas from Greg Ulmer (1986), writes about these “aha!” moments as moments of detonation or “where something that was “taught” that may have laid dormant in an individual is now awake, relevant, useful, and on the cusp of becoming meaning” (p. 5). If we return to the question that Germano and Nicholls posed about building a syllabus that understands time, the question can be refined to ask, “How can we create a syllabus that understands the emergent, latent, or slowness of pedagogical time?” What if the syllabus documented not only the starting or proposed course, but also showed all the deviations along the way?

When I reflect on my own experience as a student, there are many things I remember my professors teaching me something that I understood one way at the time, but as I gained new experiences those teachings took on new understandings that often left me thinking, “Oh! That is what my teacher meant when they said, x, y, or z.” Aren’t those moments that come years down the road equally valuable to determining the success of a class or a teacher? What if syllabi documented what we learned, not just during the duration of a course, but for the rest of our lives? If the syllabus is truly a document that is a permanent record of what is taught and learned,

then maybe it needs a form that allows for the adding to or continual revising of what is learned as people experience the slow detonation curriculum that Lucero talks about.

Of course, a syllabus that is continually updated every time someone learns something new isn't possible, however, there are ways to shift the syllabus in this direction that are more doable. Mark Wilson (2008) speaks to this idea when he claims that syllabus can be a living document when it is shifted to an online format because it allows for the document to be accessed and updated beyond the limitations of time and physical presence. As Germano and Nicholls (2020) write, "building a syllabus doesn't end when the course begins" (p. 163), but like any other creative practice (painting, writing, music making) it is something we can come back to, revise, change, make new. The syllabus can be the entry point, the end point, and everything in between.

This line of thinking has some connection to the reconceptualist theorists' revisioning of curriculum. One of the important elements of reconceptualist theory is the concept of time. Traditionally, western or colonial societies value a certain view of time that is sequential and linear. Speaking on this topic, the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999/2012) states,

History could be recorded systematically and then retrieved through recourse to written texts. It was based on a linear view of time and was linked closely to notions of progress. Progress could be 'measured' in terms of technological advancement and spiritual salvation. Progress is evolutionary and teleological and is present in both liberal and Marxist ideas about history" (p. 113).

Moving from the more colonial view of time and its linear focus, William Pinar (1975/1994, 2011), a well-known scholar in curriculum theory, presents a new way of conceiving of curriculum centering around the term "currere" or an acknowledgment of the way that the

biographic past and future are both found in the present. Pinar (2011) describes “currere” as a “strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interests of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 44). Based on the etymological origins of the word “currere,” it might be a course to run through, a current or flow, something that circulates, which all point to the cyclical nature of curriculum (Lucero, 2021 a).

Seeing curriculum as something that is coursing or flowing allows for multiple types of curricula beyond the prescribed curriculum. Lucero (2021a) lists four: the prescribed, the emergent, the hidden, and the lived curriculum. Lucero explains the emergent or lived curriculum rely on a broader conception of time to allow for the “aha moments.” Lucero contends these interpretations of curriculum result in the “dismantling (or at the very least, troubling) of the exclusively product-oriented linearity that we have come to associate with the word and thing itself” (p. 5). Curriculum in this sense, is a living thing that changes and flows, which Pinar (2011) argues embraces subjectivity or “belated representation of meaning making based on experiences” (p. 52). Without subjectivity, Pinar believes that education “evaporates, replaced by the conformity compelled by scripted curricula and standardized tests” (p. 43). The rise of consumerism, standardization, and increasing pushes for accountability in education are simply efforts to control what teachers teach and students learn as a way to deflect blame for the larger societal and political failures of our country. Pinar claims that schools are then battlegrounds for ideological control, and he even goes as far as claiming “the secret site of totalitarianism in America today is hidden right out in the open—it is the school” (p. 53). The push towards standardization in many school reforms attempts to ensure certain results, but as Pinar remarks, “schools cannot ensure the future, but when controlled by ideologues they can efface the past” and perpetuate violence (p. 65). Pinar further contends “attempting to force

students' engagement (let alone "learning" more generally) becomes autocratic if not mediated by the subjective knowledge teachers have of the unique individuals in one's classroom (p. 55). It seems that Pinar is seeking a rebalancing of education by recognizing the futility in thinking we can control the future, but he instead embraces a living model that includes students.

In the book *Curriculum as Syllabus*, Rocha (2020) goes beyond what other reconceptualists have done and claims the syllabus itself might be the curriculum. In the foreword, Pinar (2020) writes about the radical claim Rocha makes: "In each instance, the syllabus is a stimulus, the first step towards the main thing: the curriculum. Asserting the syllabus *as* curriculum, implying its centrality, even equivalence, to curriculum, upends one hundred years of curriculum theorizing in the United States and Canada" (p. x). Rocha seems to be saying we can conceive of all kinds of curriculum that embrace different notions of time and can be made more flexible, but maybe the most significant thing in determining what is learned are the tools, mediums, and actual practices of a teacher. Rocha (2020), speaking to this point says, "what we make, our makings, are ultimately who we become as teachers and this subjective and objective becoming—who and what we become—is always our first and last offering to our students" (p. 6). Rocha seems to be asking educators to carefully consider the syllabus as being more than an object or tool that merely points to curriculum but may in fact be the curriculum.

Thinking of curriculum or education as a thing of aliveness that resists linear models of thinking necessitates a new way of conceiving of the syllabus, one where the syllabus form documents the living nature of learning. In a Serra like gesture to "extend the vocabulary" of the syllabus, I propose a new form for the syllabus, one that resists the rigid and singular focus on the prescribed curriculum of the current form, by taking up a position between the various types of curricula and their accompanying goals for education. The new form centers on Aoki's

(1986/2004) concept of “tensionality” and attempts to strike a balance between the various purposes of a syllabus by expanding the syllabus to include three distinct phases: the proposed syllabus, the syllabus as lived, and the syllabus as documentation.

The proposed syllabus would look and sound very much like the traditional form of the syllabus. The teacher could rely on their previous teaching experience, knowledge of their discipline, and institutional knowledge to shape and determine how to accomplish the standards or institutional goals/expectations prior to meeting their students or beginning the course. The document could function as guide for the course, outlining what will be taught and how, how students will be evaluated, readings, assignments, policies, etc. The proposed syllabus also could establish the roles and responsibilities that are important in shaping the student teacher relationships. While it may seem similar to the current form of the syllabus, it incorporates a commitment to allowing the proposed itinerary to change according to the needs and feedback of the students. It can be thought of as an invitation, with an accompanying itinerary for a trip, that the professor is inviting their students to take with them.

The syllabus as lived is the second phase of the new form. It begins after the class begins and the teacher has shared their proposed syllabus. Students are invited to bring their unique history, culture, values, interests, and abilities to the classroom, necessitating modifications, additions, and detours to the proposed syllabus. The syllabus as lived marks a shift where the proposed syllabus reflects the lived realm of students. While some things may not change, the professor would work with students to adapt the learning for each individual. From this point, students could keep an ongoing syllabus document where they could add new objectives, questions, readings, and assignments based on their personal journey. The professor would meet periodically to look over the current syllabi with the student to jointly discuss and plan for how



the student's learning journey is going. While it may seem chaotic or more work for the teacher, the main responsibility falls on the students to document and guide their own learning. The syllabus then becomes an individual document that is an anchor and catalyst for discussion between the teacher and students.

The third and final phase of the new syllabus form is the syllabus as documentation. This phase happens at the end of a designated duration such as the conclusion of the semester. The syllabus as documentation shows where the student began, which would be the proposed syllabus the teacher made. It would then show documentation of the way the students' learning evolved throughout the semester and show where the student ended up in relation to the beginning. Importantly, it also has the potential to show where students are going next or going beyond the established outcomes. Because each student would maintain their own syllabus, the syllabus could more accurately demonstrate the individual learning journey that each student took, as well as what the professor taught. In this way, the syllabus can actually show what was proposed and what was learned.

**Permission #8: There is more than one way to define a curricular frame or boundary through the syllabus.** One of the initial jobs a teacher needs to do before they teach a class is determine what it is they are going to teach or what knowledge is worth knowing (curriculum). Let's imagine this situation by comparing it to my kids' blocks. When I dump out the box of blocks, there are a ton of blocks that are different sizes, shapes, and colors (see image). Each block represents a different possibility or topic that a teacher could focus on. As you can imagine, the possible topics could be endless, so the teacher, out of necessity, needs to determine which things they will focus on and the things that will not pertain to their educational goals for that particular moment. This is where the syllabus comes in, it is how the teacher

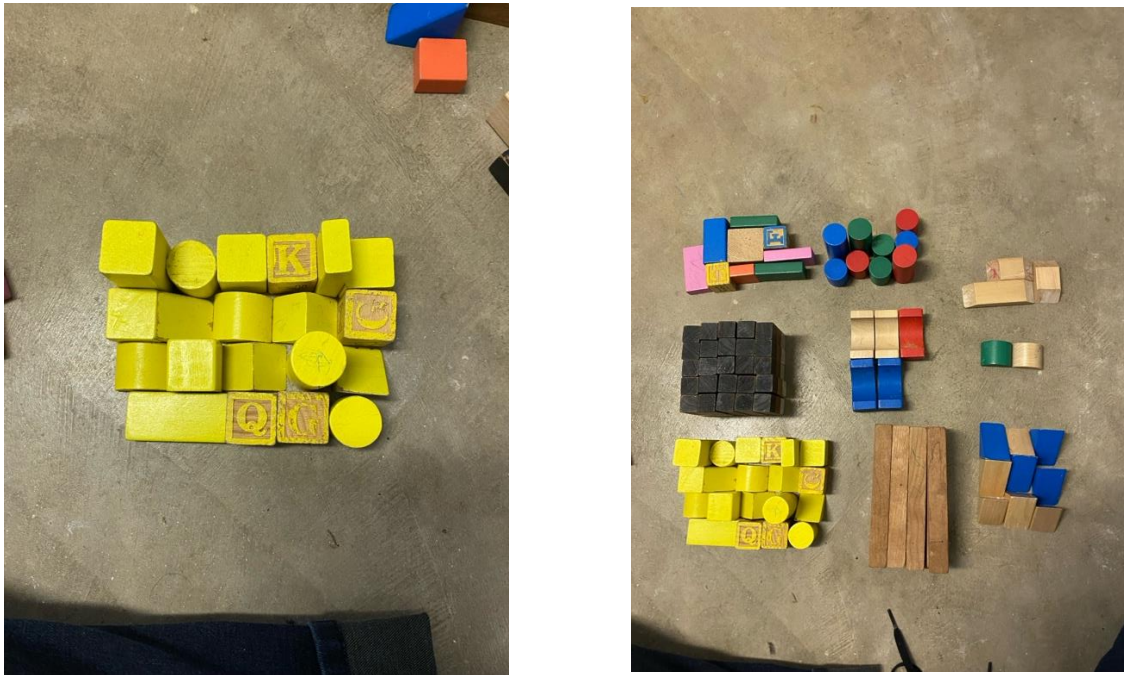
describes and defines, out of all these possibilities, what that specific course will be about. The syllabus in essence becomes the frame, boundary, or way to identify something from other things (this thing is this thing). It is like drawing a box around certain blocks and saying everything inside this box will be discussed (see Figure 44). The syllabus is typically associated with defining what the official or sanctioned curriculum is (Luke, et al., 2013; Musgrave, 2022). As a result, the curriculum reflects the knowledge that is valued by the culture of power, which might be like someone saying we like square blocks so we will focus only on square blocks (see Figure 43), or we value the color yellow the most so let's only study yellow things (see Figure 44). Each choice filters in or filters out what will be focused. The syllabus is one way that educators do this work. The conventional way of creating a syllabus defines directly what something is or will be (a tag that describes the contents, a description of a lecture, an outline of the content for a course).

**Figure 44**

*Block examples.*



Figure 44 (contin.)



However, there are other ways to create frames or boundaries that may be less typical, like defining what something is not, which is what the Syllabus of Errors does. The Syllabus of Errors was created not by listing the beliefs of the Catholic church, but by listing all the beliefs the church doesn't believe in. In other words, the Syllabus of Errors is an anti-belief list; it states all the things they do not believe, which conversely defines what they do believe.

It is not unlike the way artists use the negative space in drawing or painting as a way to define an object (see Figure 45). The British Sculptor, Henry Moore, spoke to this idea when he said, "a hole can have as much shape meaning as a solid mass" (Tate, n.d.). Marstine (2005) makes a similar comment about framing devices, "Framelessness, such as is common at museums of modern art, is a framing device as well" (p. 4-5). In other words, in the arts, negative space, or the space surrounding an object, the void, or the ruins can be sites of importance and have the potential to be generative (Kalin, 2012; Barney, et al., 2020).

Figure 45

Negative space drawings



It reminds me of Pedro Reyes' *Capula series* (2002, 2009-2010), which are sculptural/architectural objects that were created by listing the attributes of a room and then making structures that did the exact opposite (see Figure 46).

If a Room has square spaces	the Capula shall be round
If a Room has rigid walls	the Capula shall be elastic
If a Room divides the inside from the outside	the Capula shall be permeable
If a Room is grounded	the Capula shall hover
If a Room is steady	the Capula shall rock or swing
If a Room has walls that block the light	the Capula shall radiate the light
If a Room creates a fixed field of vision	the Capula shall be kinetic
If a Room needs furniture	the Capula will turn itself into furniture
If a Room hides from the view	the Capula allows a glimpse
If a Room is an ensemble of parts	the Capula shall be a continuum
If a Room is steady	the Capula shall rock or swing
If a Room has walls that block the light	the Capula shall radiate the light
If a Room creates a fixed field of vision	the Capula shall be kinetic
If a Room needs furniture	the Capula will turn itself into furniture
If a Room hides from the view	the Capula allows a glimpse
If a Room is an ensemble of parts	the Capula shall be a continuum

In fact,  
a sense  
of essence  
is,  
in essence,

the essence  
of sense,  
in effect.

Cupola

Cupule

Capsule

Couple

Copulate

Capillary

\* taken from Pedro Reyes website (Capula V (Double Bubble, 2002))

Figure 46

Pedro Reyes' Capulas

### Capula Expanded Dodecahedron

Stainless steel frame woven in vinyl cord  
2009 - 2010



### Capula Expanded Dodecahedron

Stainless steel frame woven in vinyl cord  
2009 - 2010



If a Room has square spaces

the Capula shall be round

In an interview with Tatiana Cuevas, (2006) Pedro Reyes, a sculptor trained as an architect, explains these “capulas,” were “meant to be the antithesis of a standard construction” (para. 17) meaning that the space cannot be defined “through a specific narrative or symbolism but must be defined by experience” (para. 17). By creating these non-room spaces or mini worlds, Reyes challenges the traditional notions of what a room is and the assumptions we have about what kinds of behaviors or interactions one can have in architectural spaces.

Reyes’ practice of creating a non-room space by defining the opposite of what a room is parallels the way Gunve’s “Shadow Course Curriculum” (2017), Kalin’s “Dangerous Syllabus” (2012), Huber’s “Shadow Syllabus” (2014), and Bailey’s “Other Syllabus” (2010) define the potential for what education can be by defining the opposite of how it is typically represented in traditional syllabi. By writing what they wish a syllabus would say or do or by writing what is not said or hidden, these authors define an alternative view of what education could be like, making their syllabi become the anti-syllabus. Some might wonder what changes these gestures make in the world and question their value if they cannot be accepted into the mainstream or conventional system. The value of the ghost or shadow syllabus may not make a great impact immediately on the greater system, but there is still value in creating a new narrative or way of seeing. I am reminded of the way that genres establish and reinforce the discourse, culture, and values of the dominant group, which inherently leads the minority groups with oppositional identities to form counter discourses or anti-genres in response to the dominant narrative (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2016). This might be compared to the way water droplets form on the outside of a glass containing cold water. The surface of the glass separates the liquid that is inside from outside, but it also gives a surface or place where water droplets can condense and form on the outside. Might the syllabus then be seen as a condensation point?

What if, alongside the syllabus being a tool to define what is in from what is out, it is also seen as a line or surface that gives a space to discuss the ideas that condense together on a certain topic? What if our frames or boundaries are porous? What if we pick questions, lines of tension, or relational strings that connect ideas across disciplines as the framing device? We can study what bumps into, intersects or crosses over, crashes violently into, or spins off of a certain concept or idea. Might these expand the way we relate to our students or open up new possibilities for what we can study?

Let's consider these permissions in terms of the way a reading list is made. One of the first jobs of a teacher is to determine the course's curricular, which is reflected in the list of assigned readings. Typically, the professor selects the readings and groups them by theme and assigns them in a chronological order according to an envisioned course outline (see Figure 47). In my observations, this method is usually designed around an intent to bring students into the relevant discourses surrounding a specific topic. For instance, in an art education course a professor might assign students to read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* because it is one of the seminal texts that discusses the concept of critical pedagogy. By assigning these readings, professors bring students up to speed on the existing conversations so they can begin to contribute, without repeating what has been said or feeling foolish because they were uninformed on a critical idea.



Figure 47

Reading themes and assignments.

Week V Diaspora Identity: Home, Journey, and the Border

Anderson, B. (2006). Imagined Communities. In In, B. Ashcroft et al. (Eds). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader—Second Edition*. (pp. 123-126). In the reader...

Dimitriadis, G. & McCarthy, C. (2003). Introduction. In, *Reading and Teaching the Postcolonial: From Baldwin to Basquiat and Beyond* (pp. 1-13).

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and the diaspora. In, J. Rutherford, *Identity* (pp. 222-237).

Todorov, T. (1982). Discovery. In, T. Todorov, *Conquest of America*. (pp. 1-50).

4

**Week 2: Currere**

WED Sept 2

**Readings and Discussion:**

Aoki, T.T. (2004). Teaching as indwelling between two curriculum worlds. In Pinar, W.F. and Irwin, R. L. (Eds.). *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (pp. 159-65). Routledge. (Original work published 1986)

Ng-A-Fook, N. (2012). Navigating M/other-son plots as a migrant act: Autobiography, currere, and gender. In S. Springgay and D. Freedman (Eds.), *Mothering a bodied curriculum: Emplacement, desire, affect* (pp. 160-85). University of Toronto Press.

Pinar, W.F. (1994). The method of "currere" (1975). In *Autobiography, politics and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory, 1972-1992* (pp. 19-27). Peter Lang. (Original work published 1975)

Pinar, W.F. (2011). From autobiography to allegory. In *What is curriculum theory?* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 43-66). Routledge.

**Assignment:**

*Currere* Discussion Provocation

As such, reading lists often represent a *canon*, a set of literary works that are regarded as being important, significant, or worthy of study to a specific discourse. In “Canon Vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate,” George Kennedy (2016) claims,

Canon formation is a natural human instinct, an attempt to impose order on multiplicity, to judge what is best out of many options, and to preserve traditional knowledge and values against the erosion of time and influences from outside the culture. Canons reflect the conservative, hierarchical structure of traditional societies” (p. 105).

Essentially, canons, like genres or metaphors, are not neutral in nature, but are important social constructions that create meaning and influence the way certain ideas, stories, and works are valued within a group or culture. It is critical to realize that the control of the canon, particularly what works are considered significant or worthy, reflect the values and perspectives of those with power. This speaks to what DéSautels and Larochelle (1997/1998) claimed when they said, “Whatever the field involved, established knowledge does not emerge out of nowhere; it serves as standard-bearer for those who have developed it, representing their epistemological postures and their social positions” (p. 2). If Anne Thulson (2021) is correct in her assertion in her chapter titled, “Exploding the Canon,” that the “art canon” disproportionately focuses on Western/Euro-American perspectives and men, particularly white-men, then we can assume the art canon will reflect the values and epistemological postures of western-white-men. For me, the real problem with canons is not that they reflect the bias or positionality of those who made them, because that will likely be the case with anything that is man-made, but that there will be times canons will be used without fully considering the way they oppress or privilege certain individuals.

This may seem like a tangent, but it is relevant to the creation of reading lists, because teachers often teach the way they were taught (McKay & Buffington, 2013; DéSautels & Larochelle, 1997/1998; Pajares, 1992) meaning that it is likely that teachers will subscribe to the canons they were taught. For instance, when I took a graduate level art theory class, the professor, who had recently completed his MFA degree, explained that the readings he was assigning were the readings that he was assigned in his theory classes. We were assigned to read things like Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Miwon Kwon’s *One place after Another* (2002), Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real* (1996), Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967),

and Rosalind Krauss's *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1979). I imagine that if I were to teach a graduate art theory course, it would be easy to assign some of the same readings because those are the readings I am familiar with in relation to the discourse of art theory. This story is quite typical because many of these titles show up as the most assigned texts for art courses according to the art syllabi collected and analyzed by the Open Syllabus. There isn't anything wrong with these particular readings, the issue is the way certain knowledges and perspectives are constantly represented, which may leave little room for other texts that may be newer or represent more diverse perspectives. The practice of a teacher making a reading list based on their expert knowledge also does not leave room for students to make suggestions or be involved, which may mean the readings are perceived as irrelevant to their emergent needs or interests.

The canon model is one way of constructing a reading list, but there are other ways to create one. In *Stories of Art*, James Elkins (2002) disrupts the traditional "clean story" of art history by proposing a variety of alternatives like determining the representation of art history by geographic size, language, or actual chronology meaning. Marshall, et al., the editors of *Teaching Contemporary Art with Young People* (2021), similarly advocate for exploring art through enduring themes like: self and others, the everyday, space and place, power, popular culture, inheritance, and more. In the same text, Anne Thulson (2021) suggests that the canon can be exploded by combining or partnering artworks by context of time (two artists from different eras), context of culture (two artists from different cultures), and art media (artists who use different media). Thulson (2021) contends that "We humans are meaning makers. When we see two things together, our minds can't help but imagine the reason or story of their relationship. Side by side, their very proximity almost effortlessly generates a new idea" (p. 20). Thulson's comment was influenced by the way Jorge Lucero (2016) sees collage as critical

practice in pedagogy. Lucero (2016) states, “A collage, in the end, is nothing more than two or more disparate elements placed near each other to create a third thing” (p. 6). In other words, the simple gesture of placing two things by each other inherently creates something new because we naturally begin to compare and contrast looking for meaning.

These ideas remind me of the principle of diversity that Janine Benyus (1997) argues is central to the functioning of natural ecosystems. The repetitive focus on a select canon of authors or works is like a farmer growing a monoculture crop over and over again. Eventually, it loses its vitality because it lacks the diversity that brings balance and restores nutrients to the soil. By placing new works of art or new readings in partnership with old readings, new dialogs and understandings emerge, metaphorically bringing vitality and needed nutrients back to the ecosystem. What if our syllabi were created the same way? What if we had to routinely rotate the typical texts for a course with new texts that represent the counter discourse or the views of people that are typically excluded, marginalized, or overlooked?

As a student of Jorge Lucero, I have seen him employ two relevant practices that enliven the classroom and syllabus. The first thing is the way Jorge’s syllabi are often accompanied with an extensive list of artists/readings that are created predominantly by people of the global south and authors/artists that are predominantly people of color, women, and queer scholars/artists (see image). Stephanie Springgay (2022) recounts one of the experiences that prompted Jorge to create this list. As is common in education, Jorge was asked to teach a course that was previously taught by other professors and came with a set curriculum. The content was, according to Lucero, troubling because “there were 27 readings assigned and 26 of them were written by men, and all 27 of them were written by white scholars” (as cited by Springgay, 2022, pgs. 103-104). I am sure the content of those readings had good things to offer, but for Jorge, the homogenous

perspective represented didn't reflect the aims or intent of the course, resulting in him creating the list of artists from the global south that I was given. Jorge, at least in the graduate courses I took from him, also collaboratively creates the reading list with his students. It is common for him to show up the first day of class with stacks of books which he asks his students to peruse through. The class then decides together which texts will serve the purposes of the course in terms of desired discourse. Students are also encouraged to bring additional texts that may be added to the reading list as well.

This again reminds me of something Benyus (1997) points out, which is the way nature "taps the power of limits" (p. 7). As a teacher it can be easy to fall into the trap of creating personal canons using the readings that spoke to us, even if they challenge older traditions or be diverse in nature, they still represent our singular view as the teacher. Along these lines, Agate, et al., (2020) claim:

To write a syllabus is to seize an opportunity and a responsibility to create a mini-canon that chips away at The Canon; to redefine authority; to stake out space for new voices and traditionally underrepresented perspectives; to actively and intentionally decenter the authority of prestigious research universities and the West to make space for epistemological diversity, for other ways of knowing, other forms of expertise; to participate in the legitimization of newer forms of scholarship (digital, public, artistic) (p. 1).

By inviting his students to co-create the reading list, Jorge does what Agate, et al. call for, he limits his own power and allows students to assert themselves in a way that brings balance and a sense of aliveness to his courses.

Another example of these kind of alternative approaches to creating a reading list is Angela Baldus' (2017) syllabus titled, "Perfect Pairings." This syllabus, which Baldus created for one of Jorge Lucero's courses, was created as an imagined course where the teacher and students would gather together to discuss certain readings, films, or art pieces over breakfast, lunch, and dinner throughout the week. Each meal would be paired with specific readings, which plays on the culinary practice of pairing certain drinks or foods together to create enhanced flavor combinations resulting in a richer culinary experience (see Figure 48). Instead of the reading list being constructed based on a canon or the most significant texts within a discourse, Baldus focuses on pairing the various readings in ways that might give a contrasting flavor (sweet and sour), or partner well (fat and salt), or introduce a little spice. The reading list invites further experimentation akin to tasting new foods to discover new flavors or potential pairings. A professor might even ask their students to be the ones who suggest the pairings for the readings, making the creation of the reading list a primary space for pedagogical dialog.



**Permission #9: A syllabus can simply be a way to point things out.** I have already spoken about the permissions granted by the personalized syllabi that the web company, The Syllabus, makes for its subscribers, but this innovative company's use of cyberflâneurs provides another permission regarding the way a syllabus is created. A *cyberflâneur* is an adaptation of the French *flâneur*, which is someone who takes leisurely walks; “what the city and the street were to the Flâneur, the Internet and the Superhighway have become to the Cyberflâneur” (Morozov, 2012, para. 1). If one goes to The Syllabus website and selects the Cyberflâneur tab, they can access a variety of reading lists that were created by the cyberflâneurs who are “trusted guides – artists, intellectuals, academics, journalists, and more.” Searching these reading lists is like taking a stroll through the vast internet alongside these cyberflâneurs and having them point out things or sites of interest along the way.

This imagery of walking alongside the cyberflâneur and having them point out things reminds me of the way Mark Graham, one of my art education professors, once described the word *pedagogue* as someone that walks alongside students. This interpretation of the word comes from the Latin *paedagōgus*, which referred to a person (teacher, schoolmaster, or slave) who took children to and from school. Interpreted slightly different, the pedagogue is someone who accompanies the learner on their path of learning. This brings to mind the morning walks I take with my daughter when I drop her off at school. As we walk, we talk and point things out to each other like the cardinal sitting in a tree or the ice that has formed in the pothole in the road. Sometimes these walks are spent consoling my daughter, who at times dreads going to school. We have talked about God, why leaves change colors, and how to be kind to kids who are left out at recess.



These thoughts about walking alongside and pointing out or discussing things of importance bring to mind an episode of the public radio show, *This American Life*, titled “The Show of Delights.” In the 2020 episode, Bim Adewunmi, the producer, and Ira Glass, the host, talk with Ross Gay, an author and professor at Indiana University about his book, *The book of Delight*.” The book, according to Gay, explores the moments of pleasure he finds in daily life. In the show, Gay talks about delight being related to curiosity, and then he says “Delight and curiosity are really tied up. You have to be OK with not knowing things. You have to be actually invested and happy about not knowing things” (14:09). Later on in the show, Gay says “an important part of delight is that it's an invitation. By loving something, we allow other people an opportunity to love it too—sharing, tapping someone on the shoulder to say, hey, look!” (15:30). This brings to minds those moments of walking with my daughter and her pointing out something she loves like the color of that maple leaf or the walk with the cyberflaneur who points to some article about “Why Large Families are So Happy” (see item #2 on Eno’s reading list on The Syllabus). These gestures of pointing are pedagogic in nature. As Ross explains, “Often I feel like I've had the experience of walking through the world and not seeing anything. And then someone's like, did you see how that—You don't see it until you see it. And then when you see it, you're like, whoa!” (15:45). In turn, Ross’s “Book of Delights,” is his way of pointing out things and saying, “Look!”

There is similarity between what Ross is saying and the way artists like, Hedda Sterne, describe the intent of art. In an interview with *Art in America*, Sterne says,

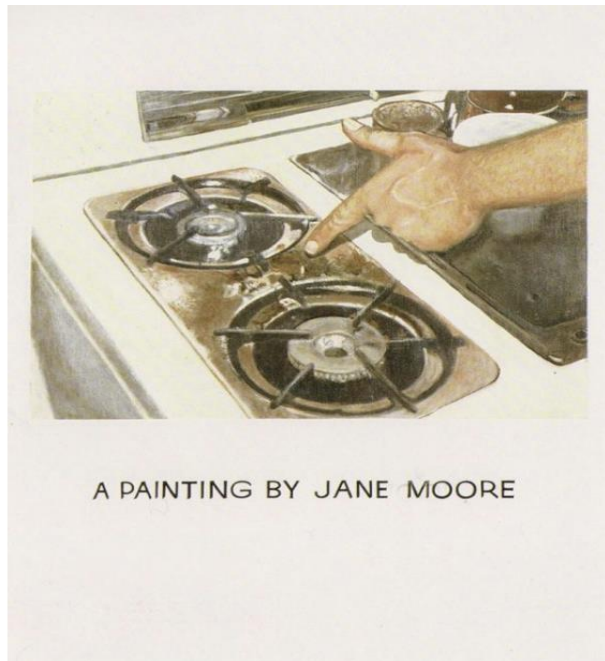
I always thought that art is not quote self-expression by communication. It is saying, hey, look! Of course, what you react to has to be transformed, without a doubt, or otherwise it

is not art, but you do that whether you want it or not. The intention, the purpose, is not to show your talent but to show *something* (as cited by Simon, 2011, n.p.).

This sentiment is quite like the well-known quote of Al Held, an abstract painter, who said: “all Conceptual art is just pointing at things” (as cited by Moderna Museet, 2020, para. 3). In the press release of their exhibition of John Baldessari’s work, Moderna Museet, a modern art museum in Stockholm, Sweden, says it was this quote that inspired Baldessari to make the series *Commissioned Paintings* (1969), which is a series of paintings depicting one of Baldessari’s friends pointing to things he found interesting (see Figure 49). The paintings themselves were not painted by Baldessari but were done by other painters, thus, each painting includes the text “A painting by,” followed by the respective painter’s name. Austin Kleon (2021), a writer and artist, in a blog post titled “Pointing at Things,” says, “Of course, *all* art is, in a sense, pointing at things! The artist sees something, and she points to it so you can see it, too” (para. 2).

**Figure 49**

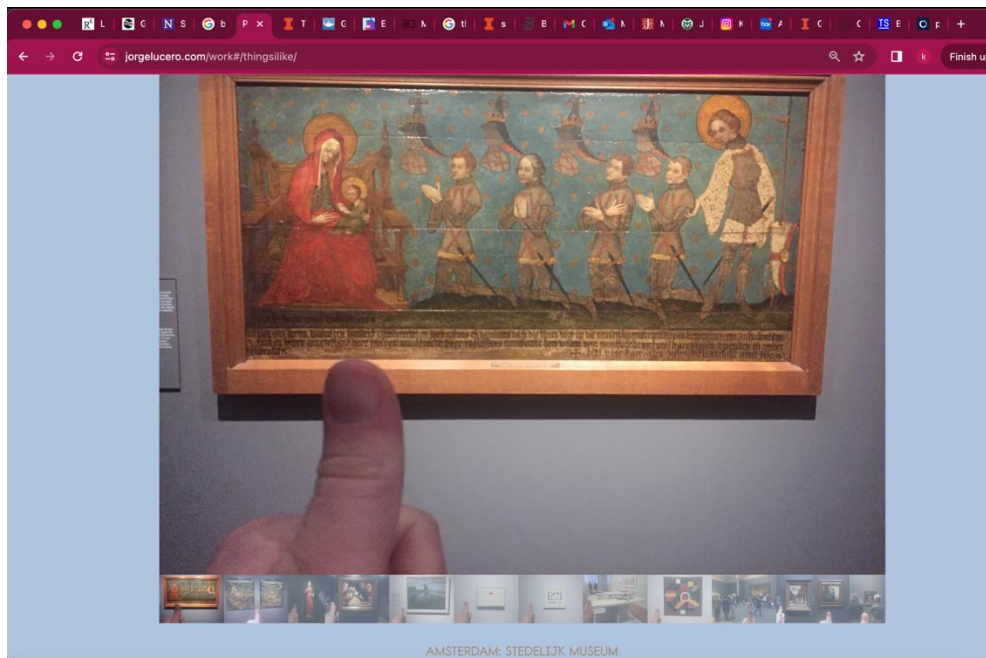
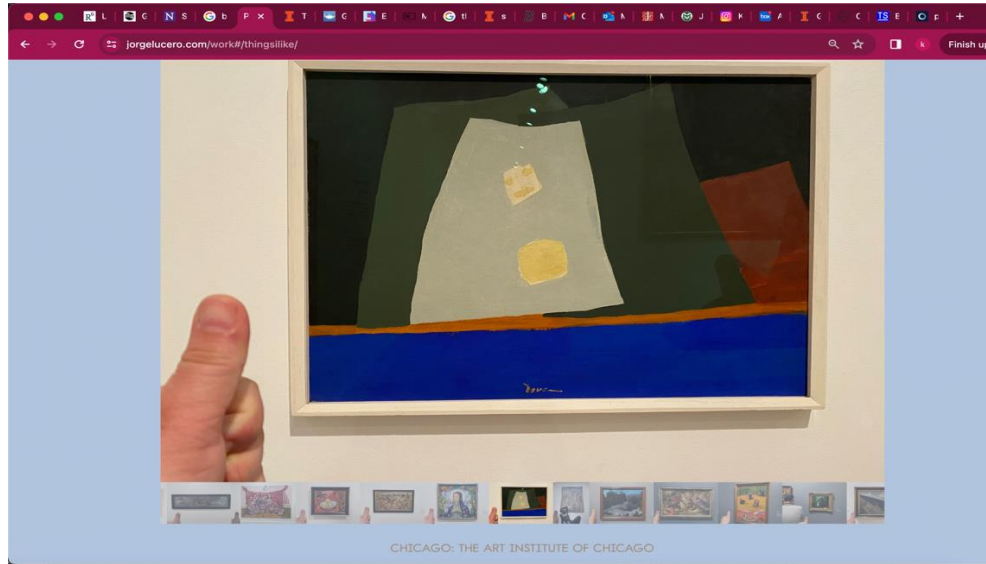
*Baldessari’s Commissioned Paintings, 1969.*



Jorge Lucero plays with this tradition of pointing at things as art in his series *Things—I—Like* (2016–ongoing) which depicts photographs of Jorge giving thumbs up to paintings he likes in various museums and art galleries (see Figure 50).

**Figure 50**

*Jorge Lucero, Things—I—Like, (2016–ongoing)*



The use of hands pointing or giving thumbs up seen in Baldessari and Jorge’s work is reminiscent of the *manicule* or “textual hand-with-pointing-finger Symbol” (Sherman, 2005, p. 1), which is a symbol used in texts to point to things of importance (see Figure 50). In an article on the brief history of the manicule, William Sherman (2005) argues the manicule is a familiar, yet often overlooked textual element that has been in use for hundreds of years. The origin of the manicule dates back to the 12–18<sup>th</sup> centuries and was used in the margins of texts and manuscripts to mark noteworthy passages in texts (Sherman, 2005). Sherman claims that the hand gesturing in a pointing motion allows the author/editor to show or teach important things to readers by calling their attention to something that may be overlooked, which in his words, “prevents the text from getting out of hand” (p. 15). For example, in Paul McPharlin’s (1942) text, we see a variety of examples of how the manicule is used to direct the attention of the reader to important details or call attention to something that may not be known (see Figure 51).

**Figure 51**

*Examples of manicules*

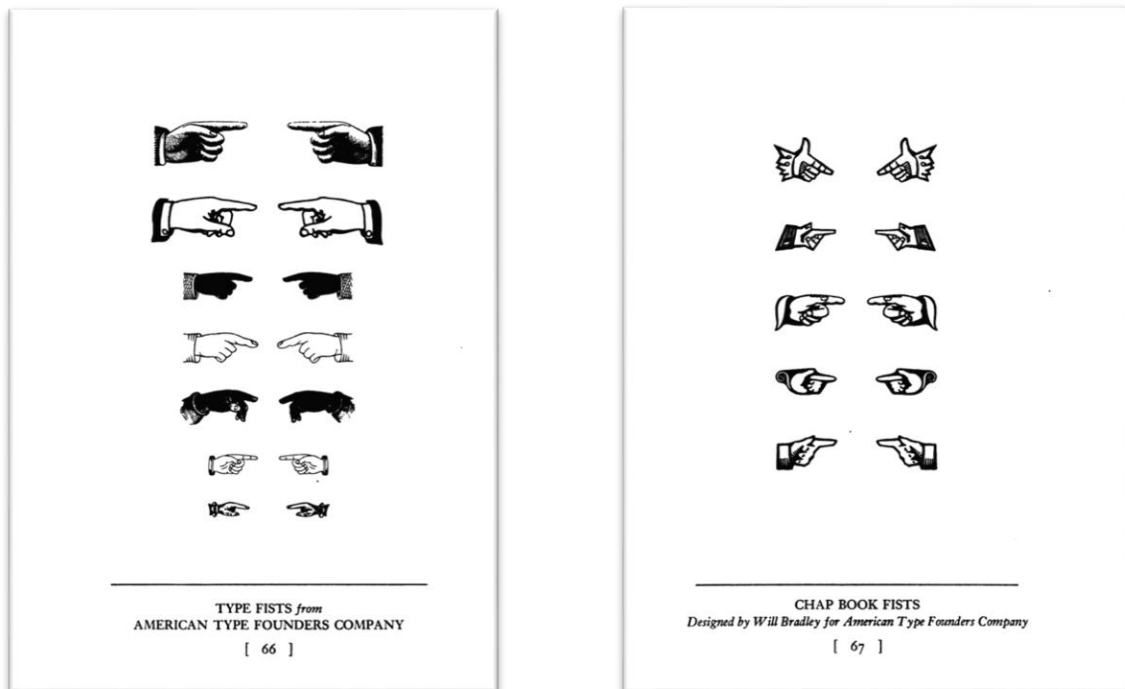
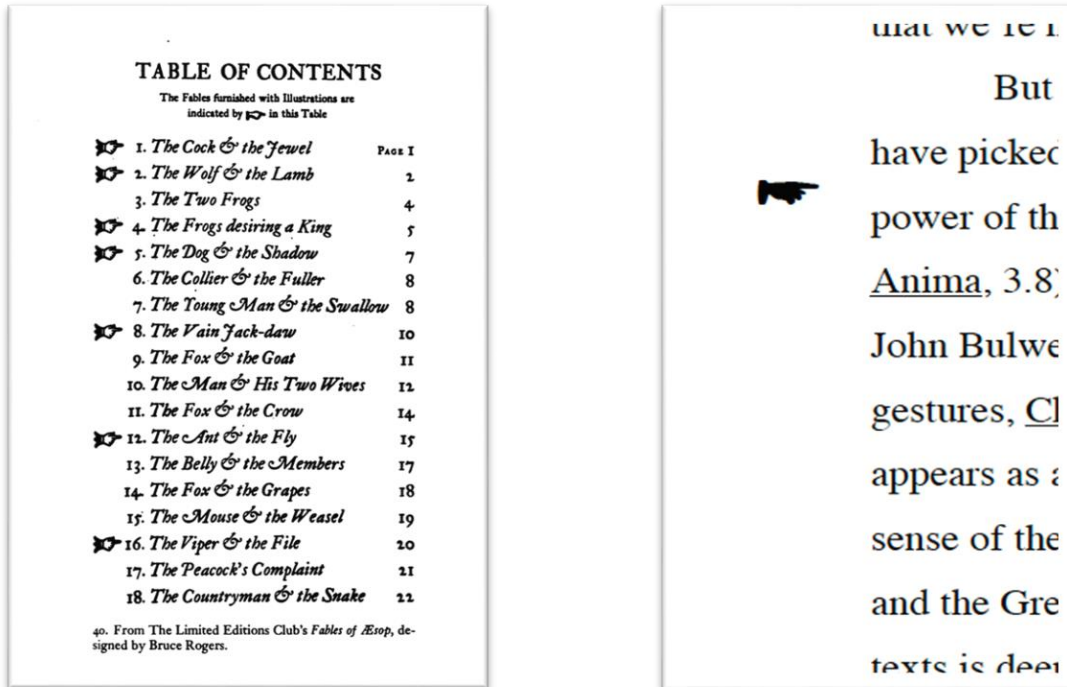


Figure 51 (contin.)



In the last few paragraphs, I have tried to draw connections between the cyberflaneur, the practices of contemporary artists, and the printer's manicule as way to suggest that while art and pedagogy may traditionally be seen as two different things, these two entities are much closer than we think. When asked about the relationship between his teaching, writing, and art making, Luis Camnitzer (2014) said, "I believe that any communication is by nature pedagogical—one tries to persuade one way or another—so I don't see any particular difference between what is considered art and what is considered classroom activity" (p. 95). Camnitzer's remark suggests that art and pedagogy are the same, just carried out in different spaces. Might this give permission to a teacher to treat the syllabus as an art/pedagogical space to point out the things of significance to their students?

In the same conversation where Camnitzer (2014) said art and pedagogy are not all that different, he also says that there is a certain condescending nature to teaching and art making because the teacher or artist feels they have something to give to others:

That is why the terms teacher and artist are so problematic. They reflect an ideology that pits those who have against those who don't have, instead of an ideology of collective enablement where it is irrelevant who has more and who has less. It is interesting that the terms of *have* and *have-nots* refer mostly to quantitative issues of income and property and not to things like wisdom" (p. 100).

This is where I see the value of the *pedagogue*, the person who comes alongside and walks with their student. Instead of a teacher being the only one to point out their "syllabus of delights," what if it was horizontal and reciprocal? The student and teacher take turns pointing things out to each other as they walk along together.

### ***Permission about What a syllabus Can Be***

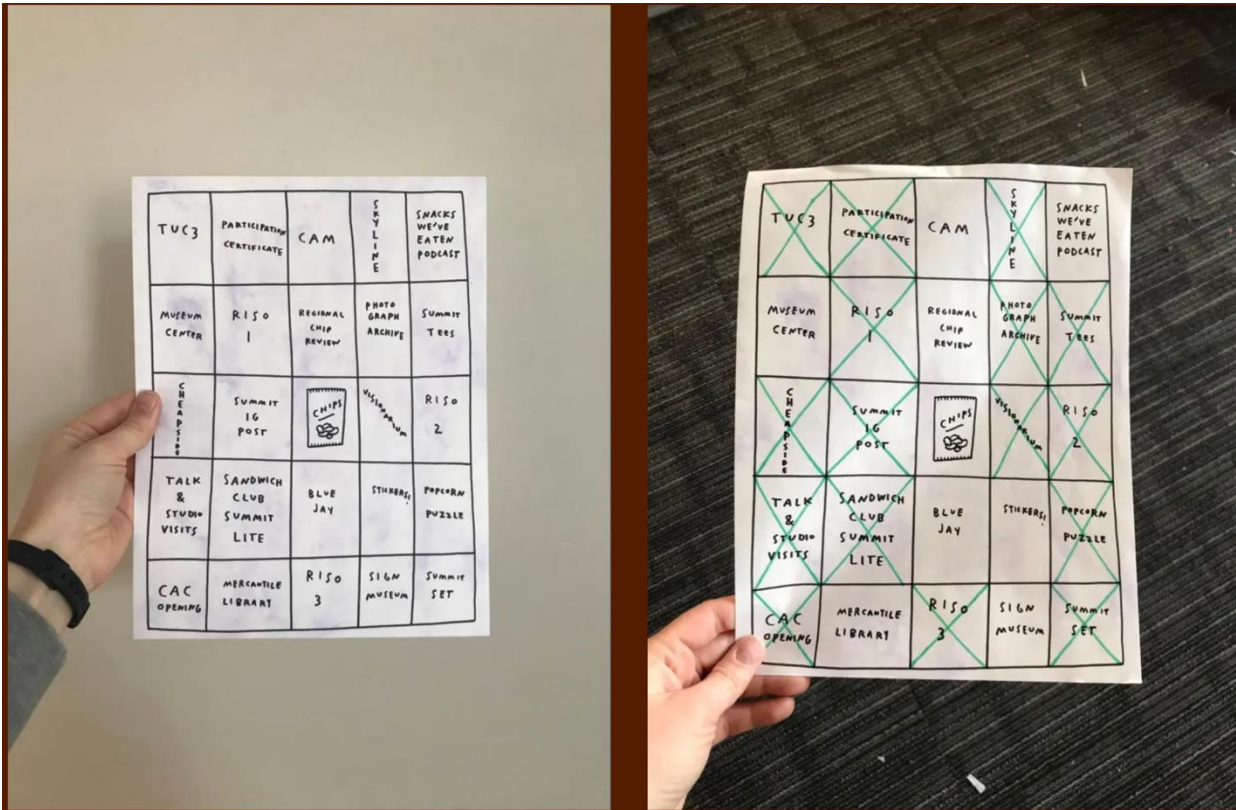
By changing how the syllabus is made, it opens up what the syllabus can be. In this last section, I will share three more permissions that were created through the expansion of the definition of a syllabus and the permissions about who makes a syllabus and how.

**Permission #10: The syllabus can be a score or script for performance art.** When I first read Bettina Makalintal's syllabus for "Five Ways to Cook an Egg" (2021), I was struck by the way it hovers somewhere between academic form and something more artistic; there are assignments, readings, and an overview which are common to academic syllabi and might suggest the intent of the author is to help us learn to cook an egg five different ways. However, learning to cook eggs feels secondary to the real lesson that invites one to pay attention to the moments of beauty or delight in the mundane activities of life, like cooking eggs. The same

could be said about Shannon Finnegan’s syllabus, *Bingo for Doing Something you Dread*, (2023). Finnegan’s syllabus introduces the concept of using a bingo card to make doing something you dread more playful (see Figure 52). The syllabus instructs step by step how to make and use a bingo card, as well as provides further readings about bingo and Artist-made tools/ways of processing. The knowledge shared by Finnegan goes beyond merely learning how to make a bingo card, but is more profound in that it offers a way of being in the world, a way of taking something you dread and turning it into something else, maybe art.

**Figure 52**

*Shannon Finnegan, Bingo for Doing Something you Dread, 2023)*



Many of the syllabi in the Syllabus Project’s archive are like this and blur the line between pedagogic form and art form. Notably missing in these syllabi are grading policies,

policies about cheating/plagiarizing, tests, and statements that attempt to control the outcome of the learning. They are more open in nature and exist more as invitations to become participants in the author's performance art piece or to have our own personal experience mediated by the course outlined in the syllabus. They function as art in the way that way that Luis Camnitzer, (2022) described, "art as a tool for cognition" (4:42), which is similar to the way Goldie and Schellekens (2010) contend that what makes art special is the way it helps us reflect on our lived experience in ways that allows us to reconsider how we think, feel, and act. These syllabi beckon readers to reflect on their human experience in a way that is both artful and pedagogic.

These examples bring up a question as to whether the syllabus is the art piece itself or a catalyst for art to happen? Karin Shankar and Julia Steinmetz (2023), pose a similar question in their special issue of the *Performance Matters* journal, when they ask: "What does a performance studies syllabus instantiate or call into being in the classroom?" (p. 1). They go on to claim that syllabi can be seen as "performance scores, performative texts, archives of pedagogical practice, and finally, as the material trace of our performance as teachers" (p. 1). Describing the syllabus in these terms suggests that the syllabus, as a score, script, or material trace, is not the thing itself but a precursor or documentation of the thing, which is somewhat confusing considering that Shankar and Steinmetz in the title of their journal issue state, "The syllabus is the thing" (p. 1). Carlos Basualdo (2016), a curator of contemporary art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, clarifies this issue to some degree when he claims, "There is, from the beginning, a double purpose inscribed in making a "score," that of performing a certain action and that of producing a physical record of an abstract quality or quantity" (para. 1). The duality that Basualdo speaks about can also be seen in the way that the artist and performer, Pablo Helguera (2016), speaks about the term "score:"



The creation of a performance score in an artwork usually means that the work is not entirely ephemeral; the existence of a score means that it can be re-created or reinterpreted either by the artist himself or by a third party. In this sense the score becomes both a form of documentation and preservation of an artistic idea and a relatively flexible structure that usually allows a certain degree of interpretation of the work (para. 2).

Helguera goes on to say that scores or performative texts can come in the form of verbal agreements (he references the work of Tino Sehgal) or as instructions (as in some Fluxus pieces). Other works like John Cage's performance *4'33* (1952/53), Allan Kaprow's "Happenings," Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit: A book of instruction and drawings* (1964), Sol Lewitt's *Wall Drawings*, or Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July's *Learning to Love You More* (2002–2009) could easily be referenced as art pieces that blur the line between art and pedagogy and question where the art is; is it the thing or is the thing made possible through the form in front of you? Helguera (2016) further claims, "In the visual arts the term *score* is borrowed from music to refer to a predetermined series of physical, verbal, or musical actions conceived by an artist and meant to be reinterpreted" (para. 1), meaning the true nature of a syllabus, as script or score, is to invite the student to reinterpret what is written there in their own way.

The syllabus as a score or performative texts reframes the syllabus as a site of dialog which allows for generous and emergent dialog between the syllabus and the actors (both teachers and students). Another way to think of this interaction between teachers and students is like a collage. Speaking about collage gestures, Jorge Lucero (2016) states, "Maybe pairs can be made and those pairings simply bring separate entities to "live" near each other. Their coexistence, despite their dissonance (maybe even because of their dissonance), becomes a new

sort of some “thing.” Maybe that is art” (p. 6). As a student of Jorge’s, I have found that he envisions teaching and learning as a dance or coexistence, and it is this being with each other that is the art for him. For instance, consider the following description that Jorge wrote for one of his courses:

This is not a class. It is an artwork. Even when it appears to have all the characteristics of a class (e.g. students, a teacher, a meeting time, a syllabus, assignments, a classroom space, grades, course credit, teaching and learning, etc.) it will never be a class. Much like René Magritte’s famous *The Treachery of Images*—where the viewer’s perception of a pipe is immediately rerouted to the obviousness of its being a mere picture of a pipe—so will the participants of this class-not-a-class consistently oscillate between the appearance of a class and the pliable materiality of being in a class, at a specific time in history, in a location, focused on a specific topic, alongside a once-in-a-lifetime set of individuals. What this means is that this “class” is merely a set of materials and we—the participants—now need to decide what to do with that material (as cited by Springgay, 2022, p. 103).

The materiality of school and the syllabus are merely the catalyst or thing that sets in motion the real event, the interaction between teachers and students.

Thinking of the syllabus as a generous and emergent space of dialog between teachers and students is sometimes hard for me to accept because it works against the way I was conditioned to read documents like the syllabus. I did not think of a syllabus as a conversation, but simply as a way for me to know what I was supposed to do as the student. When I created syllabi as a teacher, it was me communicating the expectations and parameters that I had for the course I was going to teach. This thought extends even further to the way I related to the texts I

was assigned to read in class. Sherman (2015) once wrote that “For most literate adults now, reading is a fully internalized process, a matter of invisible and inaudible communication between the eyes and the brain; and, in our most idealized and disembodied accounts, we imagine a cerebral communion with absent authors (many of whom no longer have bodies)” (p. 6), which resonates with my experience. However, this changed for me partly from my research and exposure to alternative ideas about the syllabus, but also due to my own creative practices.

During an arts-based research class, I began playing with the syllabus, particularly the reading list component of a syllabus, through a series of artistic gestures. One of the gestures was an attempt to make visible the way authors of the assigned reading are real people and not just a name on a list. I tried to come up with ways to alter my relation and perspective to a text by imagining sitting down and talking in-person with the authors, instead of the disembodied way I typically experience reading. As a result, I found images of each of the authors from my assigned texts and turned them into an augmented reality experience where this group of authors form a semicircle around the reader (see Figure 53). As these authors hovered there while I read a text, it reminded me that they were real people who had real experiences, emotions, and stories to tell. Consequently, the words I was reading in the text were brought to life in a way that felt like I was sitting in conversation with these authors.

**Figure 53**

*Augmented Reality authors.*



These examples demonstrate that the syllabus can—in fact—be a site of living dialog, a script that will be animated and performed differently by every new class, and a collage between students and teachers. I have come to the same conclusion as Springgay (2022), who said that by “refusing the normative limits of a canon and restrictive ideas about what knowledge is of most worth, the ordinariness of a minor gesture, such as collaboratively and artfully creating a syllabus as the output of a course, and as an art practice, reimagines education otherwise” (p. 104).

**Permission #11: Syllabus objects open up different types of learning experiences.**

The syllabus is predominately experienced in text form, but if a syllabus is defined by what it does, over what it looks like, then a syllabus does not necessarily have to be written. Fredrich

Froebel’s “gifts,” the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum’s postcard-viewfinder, and the CD that Dr. Smith was given by her dad demonstrate how objects can function like their textual counterparts. The permission to think of the syllabus as an object has some precedence in the kits that Fluxus artists like George Maciunas made (see Figure 54). Maciunas’ *Fluxkit* (1965) is a brief case containing scores for events, interactive games, pieces of art, journals, and films that were made by a variety of artists. More recently, The Pedagogical Impulse created the *Instant Class Kit* (2019), which is a “portable curriculum guide and pop-up exhibition dedicated to socially-engaged art as pedagogy” (The Pedagogical Impulse, Project Description, n.d.) (see Figure 55). The kit contains sensory objects, zines, scores, newspapers, and games made by a group of diverse artists/educators. These curriculum/artists kits are made anew each time a person activates them through their engagement with the materials. What does the change in form open up in terms of pedagogical possibilities?

**Figure 54**

George Maciunas, *Fluxkit*, 1965



**Figure 55**

The Pedagogical Impulse, *Instant Class Kit*, 2019.



During the same arts-based research class I mentioned earlier, I asked a similar question: What happens when things that exist digitally are made physical, or vice versa, what happens when physical things are made to exist digitally? In my experience as a grad student, most of the assigned readings I get are in a digital form. I wondered what would happen if I took my digital assigned readings and pushed them into the physical world by printing them? I took all the reading I got for the semester (2 courses worth), shrunk them down so they would be 3 inches in width, and printed them out double-sided. After joining all the pages together into one long continuous scroll that, when stretched to its full-length, measures about 1500 ft. I then rolled the scroll onto an old wire spool (see Figure 56). Using a magnifying glass, I completed my readings by unspooling sections of the scroll at a time (see Figure 56). Reading this way was a completely different experience which altered the way I related to the readings. When the scroll is unfurled,

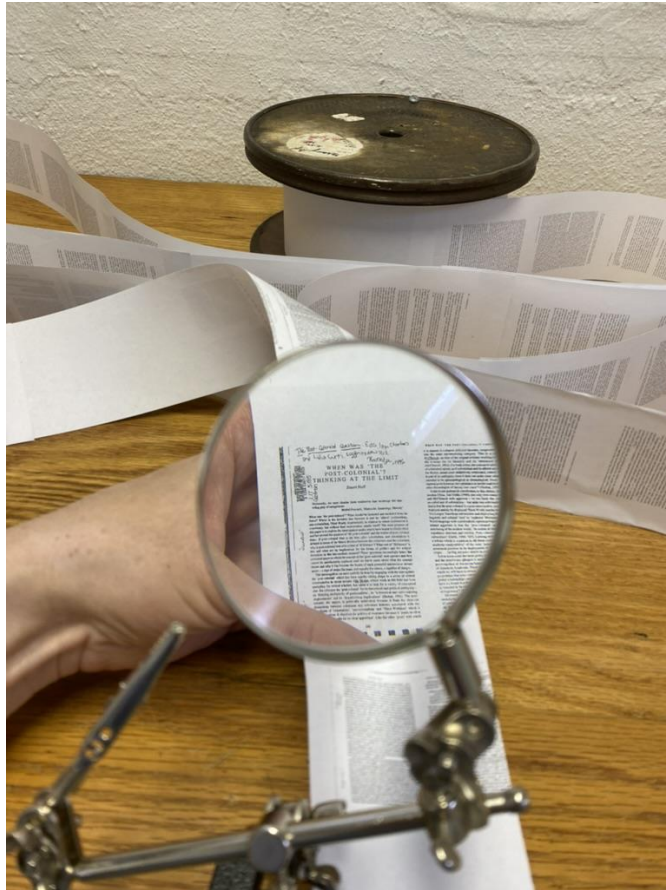
it creates a massive-tangled pile of paper that takes up space. I had to laboriously scroll and squint to read the text which turned the reading into an arduous experience. However, the physical act of scrolling through the readings grounded me in and made me feel as if I was taking a journey, stitching those authors' words into a path that I had to walk. I could measure it, feel it, and experience the reading in my body in a way that is not possible when it is digital.

**Figure 56**

*Reading Scroll*



Figure 56 (contin.)



To return to the question at hand, the physical nature of these objects naturally invites and values learning that is done through experimentation and play. In *Architecture in Play*, Tamar Zinguer (2015) argues that “play belongs in the category of “tacit knowledge.” It elicits a response that is at once immediate, intuitive, and universally understood. Furthermore, the nature of play, which involves competing aspects of reality and fantasy as well as truth and illusion, allows for diverging definitions of the concept” (p.9). In other words, play is open-ended and can be done by almost anyone regardless of age and training. The success of Froebel’s gifts as pedagogical objects came from Froebel’s awareness of children’s natures and allowing them to play with the objects in an unrestricted way. Clearly, Froebel had a pedagogical intent in



designing, organizing, and sequencing his gifts and occupations in the way he did, yet he was open to children learning for themselves. According to Helge Wasmuth (2020), a childhood education professor, the objects Froebel chose had connections to the specific laws or principles of nature: natural geometry, symmetry, contrast, balance, the way motion changes the appearance of shape, color, etc. As children played with the variety of “gifts,” they were able to gain knowledge of the physical world through experience, leading to a more unified and interconnected harmony between their inner and outer worlds (Wasmuth, 2020). While speaking about the philosophies behind Froebel’s gifts, Wasmuth (2020) states, “Life unification is the goal of the entire human life and thus also of education. To come true, every creature, as a child of God, strives to express the divine powers and internal laws in him externally, they want to make the inner outer” (p. 65). For Froebel, children could come to understand themselves and how the world works by directly observing the physical world, thus gaining a greater awareness and control of oneself.

Another part of the genius of Froebel’s pedagogy is the way that play is open-ended and never-ending. For example, children’s blocks, which was one of Froebel’s gifts, are intended to be taken apart and rebuilt anew each time. In this way, play is “unpredictable and always entails a sort of deviation” (Zinguer, 2015, p. 2), and even the misuse or failure of the toy can be pedagogical in nature. For example, the children’s toy Lego, interlocking plastic bricks, come in sets that often have instructions to build a specific object (pirate ship, castle, plane, etc.), but they also are intended to be easily deconstructed and reconstructed into something of your own making. The interlocking components make it possible to reconfigure the bricks into endless possibilities. The intent is not to get children to make one end product, but to allow them to construct and use their imaginations. The same basic principle could be said about the postcard-

viewfinder that the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum gives to visitors. They are not trying to get everyone to see the exact same as O’Keeffe, they are trying to get us to take on her posture of looking. Its open nature invites continual play and continual observation. Stephanie Springgay (2022), while speaking about the kinds of syllabi that take other forms (like kits, Froebel’s gifts, or performative scores), says:

What is ordinary—a syllabus—becomes more-than, or extraordinary, as the assemblages of information and knowledge multiply and mutate. The syllabus as score does not predetermine the course or the learning; rather it acts as both an agitator or proposition and as a trace of the pedagogical encounter, the fleeting and ordinary moments of exchange” (p. 102).

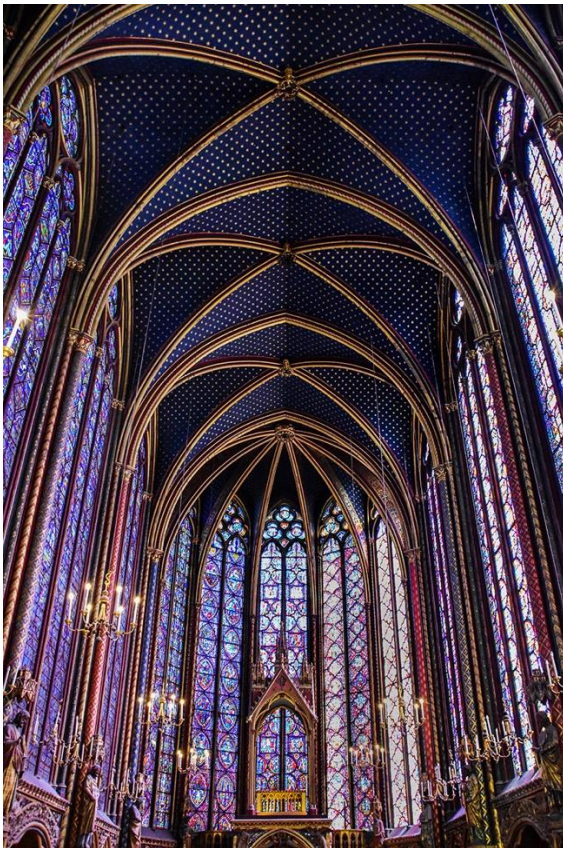
What if this was how academic syllabi were constructed? What if they were intended to be misused, deconstructed, rebuilt according to the interpretation of each new class of students?

**Permission #12: The syllabus can be seen as pedagogical architecture.** There are two ways the syllabus can be seen as pedagogical architecture: one is the literal pedagogical quality of physical architecture, and the other is the way the syllabus functions symbolically like architecture. When I argued in the introduction that my parents fire-ring could be seen as a syllabus, I was talking about the way the physical architecture or space creates the context that allows for certain pedagogical events to occur, like gathering around the fire ring to tell stories and to pass knowledge from one generation to the next. The idea that architecture can be pedagogical in nature is not new but is actually quite old. According to Brent Cook (2020), a Christian historian, the Gothic cathedrals of the 12–16<sup>th</sup> centuries were designed to teach patrons Christian stories and ideals, as well as inviting postures of looking to heaven and God. Cook (2020) claimed that Gothic architecture was used as the medium to communicate symbolic

meaning to create a more unified worldview under Christianity. For example, as a result of technological advancements and lighter walls, Gothic architects could create vast-open spaces that enabled cathedrals to soar above patrons, symbolically lifting the patrons' gazes towards heaven (see Figure 57). In addition, Gothic architecture used larger windows than older Romanesque architecture which allowed more light to enter the space, symbolizing the way Christ radiated light into darkness. There were also ornate carvings, stained glass windows, sculptures, and other decorative elements that depicted various scenes from Christian theology that were used to teach Christian ideals or doctrines to people who were mostly illiterate. As Cook succinctly puts it, "Everywhere the visible seemed to reflect the invisible" (p. 20).

**Figure 57**

*Gothic Cathedrals*



It is not just cathedrals or other religious buildings that have pedagogical intent built into them. In a book on contemporary library architecture, Ken Worpole (2013) argues that public buildings, like libraries, are powerful architectural spaces because they create “structures of space that embodied ways of thinking and feeling about the world and people's relation to it” (p. 33). Worpole’s claim suggests that architectural spaces are laden with symbolism and belief systems that significantly inform the way people experience and think about the world around them, whether we are aware of their influence or not. This is similar to the argument Dianne Harris (2007) makes in *Race, Space and the Destabilization of Practice*, where she contends that the built environment must be considered an active agent in the formation of ideas about race, identity, belonging, exclusion, and minoritization” (p. 2). Considering public spaces as an active agent may feel odd to some because as Worpole (2013) discusses, public spaces like libraries are often considered to be spaces that represent open minded thinking and are often considered to be neutral space. However, Philip Plowright (2020) In *Making Architecture Through Being Human*, claims that public spaces, as things that are constructed by a human with a purpose and intent, will inherently reflect the bias and perspectives of the designer who made it. Plowright goes on to say “making something and what something means are intimately related. Our environment influences the way we think and how we think affects what we put into the environment” (p. 5). In other words, the spaces we make reflect the world views of those who made them, and those spaces in turn shape and (in)form how we think, act, feel, and relate to others and the broader world.

Despite this fact, architecture is often not thought of in terms of pedagogy. In the article, “Architecture as Pedagogy,” David Orr (1993) says the big issue with our relationship to buildings is

that, “We've not thought of academic buildings as pedagogical, but they are. (p. 227). Orr further elaborates,

The deeper problem is that we've assumed, wrongly I think, that learning takes place in buildings but that none occurs as a result of how they are designed or by whom, how they are constructed and from what materials, how they fit their location, and how they operate and how well. My point is that academic architecture is a kind of crystallized pedagogy and that buildings have their own hidden curriculum that teaches as effectively as any course taught in them (p. 226)

For example, Orr claims the typical classroom is designed solely with function in mind, resulting in a space that is uninteresting and unpleasant to be in, which communicates to teachers and students that the space is not a space one should want to hang around in and feel comfortable. As a result, the space is often quickly vacated after a class is over.

David Byrne, the musician and lead singer/guitarist of the band, Talking Heads, makes a similar claim about the influence of space on our creative practices. In Byrne's book *How Music Works* (2012), Byrne recounted several occasions where he would write music in one space but when he played the music in a different venue, the music sounded quite different, leading him to conclude that “context largely determines what is written, painted, sculpted, sung, or performed” (p. 13). This idea challenges the conventional wisdom that creation comes from within the creator alone and is not influenced by external contexts. Byrne further comments that he believes creative practitioners unconsciously and instinctively respond to the spaces, contexts, and preexisting formats that surround them when working. It is not just the space but the technology we use that shapes our music, art, and teaching. Byrne argues that while we may think of something like recording music as an “Objective acoustic mirror” that gives off the appearance

of being “like magic—a perfectly faithful and unbiased representation of the sonic act that occurred out there in the real world” (p. 76), it is not, leading him to conclude, “neutral” technology does not exist” (p. 79). One way to interpret Byrne’s comments would be to devalue the record, the photograph, or piece of art because it is not “the thing” but some poor rendition of it, but I think his point is not to say these things don’t have value but to caution us against overlooking or mistaking what they are and do.

Maybe one of the reasons that we neglect the powerful influence of spaces is because they exist quietly in the background. They don’t usually demand our attention and the knowledge they pass on is subtle. Another possibility is we are losing an ability to recognize symbolism and the pedagogical intent in things like architecture. In Cook’s (2020) article about the pedagogical nature of Gothic cathedrals, he claims, “Whereas the medieval world had a developed appreciation for art and architecture, the modern information age focuses on text” (p. 20). Cook seems to suggest we have lost the ability to read into symbolic things like art and architecture, meaning their influence in our lives happens on a subconscious level that we are not fully aware of. In addition, in terms of the pedagogical quality of architectural spaces, there is always a certain level of uncertainty and unpredictability that exists in them because one can never fully control or tell how people will react to the space or the symbolism within it. Consequently, I believe that we overlook the powerful influence of things like technology or architectural spaces simply because they are mundane and hover in the periphery of our lives.

However, there are some, like Joseph Altshuler and Julia Sedlock (2021), who ask us to reconsider our relationship with architecture by asking “What if our architecture was not a tool but a friend, a subject with its own experience of the world and its own set of needs?” (p. 15). Treating architecture like a friend or companion goes against the traditional way that architecture

is seen as merely being a space that serves its human occupants by providing shelter, supporting certain activities, or communicating ideas or values. In their book, *Creatures are Stirring: A Guide to Architectural Companionship*, Altshuler and Sedlock (2021) pursue how buildings can be seen as living things by taking a variety of creative gestures that play with the idea of *zoomorphism*, which they define as such:

Zoomorphism is a representational or literary technique that attributes animal like qualities, appearances, and behaviors to humans, objects, or other kinds of beings. Zoomorphic architecture has the power to increase our capacity to relate to and empathize with abiotic entities (like buildings), expanding our imagination so we can recognize them as creatures. In turn, it becomes a means to decenter ourselves in the narratives that shape our relationships to other cohabitants of the planet-human, nonhuman, and abiotic” (p. 28).

If buildings are seen as being a creature that is alive, then we as humans can have different types of relationships with them, much in the way that we have relationships with pets, plants, or even each other. For instance, at one point in their book, Altshuler and Sedlock (2021) share some insights they learned from Brianna Noble, a horse trainer who rehabilitates rescued horses, about the way horses behave, which can provide a parallel potential for human to architecture relationships. Noble explains that horses naturally read the emotions of their herd and reflect those emotions in their own behavior as part of their evolutionary flight or fight response. As such, when horses interact with their human care givers, they often reflect the emotional state of the person. Noble describes the way horses mimic their human companion’s emotions being like a “mirror that allows us to evaluate ourselves in an ever forgiving, nonjudgmental way” (as cited by Altshuler & Sedlock, 2021, p. 15). Altshuler and Sedlock

wonder if architecture could do the same, could it “put up a mirror that allows us to evaluate ourselves in an ever forgiving, nonjudgmental way, and what if we actually looked at what the mirror showed us and responded to it in a way that would help us address some of the crises facing humanity at this moment in time?” (p. 15). For those who might wonder about the value of these sorts of gestures, Altshuler and Sedlock (2021) explain, “While temporary inhabitation of a non-human, or more-than-human, world may be pleasurable in and of itself, it also provides an opportunity to practice or rehearse more desirable ways of relating to other humans” (p. 13). These types of gestures which entertain the idea that buildings can act like creatures may be somewhat absurd or extreme, but if we can suspend our belief and embrace the idea of abiotic agency, we might find in return that we have been changed, altered, or shifted in how we think or act.

When I think about the work of architects, I think about the way they create spaces. The word *space* is an interesting word because it can be interpreted to be both something physical and conceptual. Erdem Üngür (2011) explains that the term *space* originates from the German *raum*, which can mean both “a material enclosure’ (room) and as ‘a philosophical concept’ (space)” (p. 1). As a result, Üngür explains that the role of architectural elements, like the wall, is to create a boundary that makes the “enclosed space visible” (p. 2). Along these lines, the LBR Architecture group claims there is some irony in the way we think of space in architecture because space is “the open area, the volume, between the structural elements. A negative between the positive solids,” meaning that what we see “is not the space itself, but the defined boundaries. The walls, ceilings, floors, shadows, beams of light, textures of the fabrics. These all define the boundaries rather than the space” (LBR Architecture, n.d., How We Experience Spaces section, para. 2). The work of an architect then is to create boundaries or frames that



define space and how that work is done will determine how people will see and approach that space. Similarly, the architect Magdalena Koziń-Woźniak (2019) once said, “to build is to draw location out of the space and architecture is an art of discovering a location (p. 395).

How does this view of architecture relate to the syllabus? The syllabus, like the wall, the window, or roof, creates a boundary or frame to define pedagogical space, only instead of physical constructions, the syllabus is more conceptual in nature. Pedagogical space is where a teacher defines what knowledge is worth knowing (curriculum), the way to access that knowledge (pedagogy), and establishes the relational aspects of the pedagogical encounter between teacher and students. John Dewey (1964) describes a similar framework for education: “Education is a conscious, purposive, informed activity. The central notions involved in education, then, are (1) the aim of the activity; (2) the agent responsible for the activity (the teacher); (3) the subject of the activity (the pupil); and (4) the means by which the aim is achieved (curriculum and method)” (p. xxii). Like the physical elements of architecture (the wall, roof, stairs, etc.), the syllabus provides structure or touch points for things that are abstract in nature (knowledge, pedagogy, thinking) and just like the way structural elements of a building are put together determines what the space will be like and what can be done within it, the way the syllabus is constructed, both in the physical form and conceptual ideas represented within it, shape the pedagogical experience.

Paying attention to these constructions is vital for teachers because as Agate, et al., (2020) contend, the syllabus is a “construction site for notions of authority, legitimacy, and power...when we create and share a syllabus, we indicate to our students and colleagues that we believe certain people, forms, and arguments to be worthy of their attention” (p. 1). Agate, et al (2020) go on to state that the creation of the syllabus is an opportunity “to build up traditionally

underrepresented voices and forms of scholarship and redefine the parameters of the scholarly conversation” (p. 1). Just as the architect creates spaces that make certain types of activities possible or imparts certain values through symbolism, the teacher has the opportunity to create, through the syllabus, the pedagogic spaces that will frame certain ways of knowing that will convey what knowledge is valid and important.

In “Architecture as Pedagogy,” David Orr (1993) asks, “What do we want our buildings to say about us?” (p. 227), only instead of *buildings*, lets swap it with *syllabi*, “What do we want our syllabi to say about us?” What do they encourage? What kind of relationships to others, ourselves, the planet do they make possible? What values are reflected in them? Too often, the syllabus feels like the classroom that Orr (1993) claimed empties rapidly after the class is over because it is uninviting and boring, which is essentially what Rocha (2020) claims when he said the syllabus was not written as something that students or teachers should want to read deeply or spend much time with.

How can the syllabus be reimagined as a space that is inviting, safe, and comfortable; a space that instead of exiting quickly, we want to linger in and occupy for a long duration. In *A Conception of Teaching* (2009), Nathaniel Gage argues that formal education is usually limited to the interactions and learning that occur when students are in the *presence* of a teacher, meaning face-to-face interactions. However, Gage notes, teaching “can also occur when a teacher creates influential events, in which he or she does not participate” (pg. 2). What if the syllabus then was reframed as a “provisional architecture” (Basualdo, 2016, para. 1), “a conceptual scaffolding that provides focus and direction” (Helguera, 2016, para. 3), or an architectural plan that functions as a “living set of instructions” (J. Altshuler, personal communication, May 18, 2023) that extend the educational presence beyond the classroom?

Students could take the syllabus with them, like the way a hermit crab carries its home on its back. Maybe this creates the possibility of a wandering classroom.

### **The Importance of the Expanded Syllabus Permissions**

Now that I have shared a variety of ways other scholars or artists have played with the syllabus by changing its form or conventions regarding who makes it, how it is made, and what it can be, which I argue creates an expanded list of permissions that make different teacher postures possible, you might be wondering what does this expanded vocabulary and set of permissions regarding the syllabus do for us?

### ***Multiplicity of the Syllabus***

This expanded view of the syllabus gives us many options for what a syllabus can be, who can make a syllabus, and how a syllabus can be made or used. Prior to this research, I knew one form of the syllabus, the academic form, and thought of it in a conventional way as being a contract and educational document to inform students about what a course will be like. Each of the ideas for what a syllabus can be presents a certain way of approaching education and establishes the posture of both students and teachers. In other words, prior to this research I only had one or two poses that I could take regarding the syllabus. Now that I have studied a variety of historical and contemporary examples, I have an array of options and possible postures I can take. For example, I now know that the syllabus can be made collaboratively with my students, the syllabus can be something that doesn't have to only be made before a course begins but can be made and remade throughout the course. These new permissions grant me new postures that I can take as a teacher. I can now say, "Yes, the syllabus is...but it can also be..." This feels important because when we can see something or express a new way of thinking, it changes what

we know and what we can do as a result. I have many options or ways that I can hold myself as a teacher, whereas before I had only one.

As we contemplate the variety of ways to approach the syllabus and teaching, it is important to keep in mind something that James Seitz (2019) said, “All pedagogical decisions come with gains and losses” (p. 459). In other words, no one approach to the syllabus will be perfect or a “panacea” (Seitz, 2019, 459). Each approach will do some things well and other things not so well. It is like the way that the form, or lack of form, of a thing will alter the way people interact with it or use it, thus shaping the outcomes. For example, water in a gas form is much more difficult to see, touch, control, measure etc., in comparison to water in a liquid or solid state. The form of water determines a person’s possible actions and interactions with the water. Water in a solid form (ice) can be walked on, allowing a person to walk across a river and still be dry. However, water in a liquid form would necessitate a person to swim or find a bridge or a boat to cross the same space. Similarly, the three elements that make up the essence of a syllabus can manifest themselves differently, which affords or limits certain behaviors or outcomes. Another useful metaphor to illustrate this point can be found in photography.

**Photography Metaphor.** Film photography is all about light, and the craft of photography lies in controlling the duration and way light is exposed to the light-sensitive film. The final image will depend on the amount or intensity of light that the film received during exposure. There are three basic ways of controlling the way light is exposed to the film: aperture, shutter speed, and film light sensitivity. These three components are called the “exposure triangle” in photography. Each of these aspects play a vital role in determining what the end image will look like, beyond just the amount of light.

The aperture is the hole or opening in the lens that controls the amount of light that can pass through the lens and reach the film. A larger aperture allows more light to pass through to the film, compared to a smaller aperture for the same amount of time. The aperture has another important function: it controls the depth of field or how much of an image is in focus at a time. Smaller apertures have a greater depth of field, which enables the background, middle ground, and foreground to all be in focus at once. Larger apertures have a shorter depth of field, meaning only part of the image will be in focus.

Shutter speed controls how long the shutter, the piece that opens and closes to allow light into the camera, is open, and determines how long the film is exposed to light. The longer a shutter is open, the more light is exposed to the film. Shutter speed also determines the amount of motion blur that will show up in the image. Faster shutter speeds capture movement and make it look like a clear freeze frame or a stopping of time. Slow shutter speeds, on the other hand, blur movement.

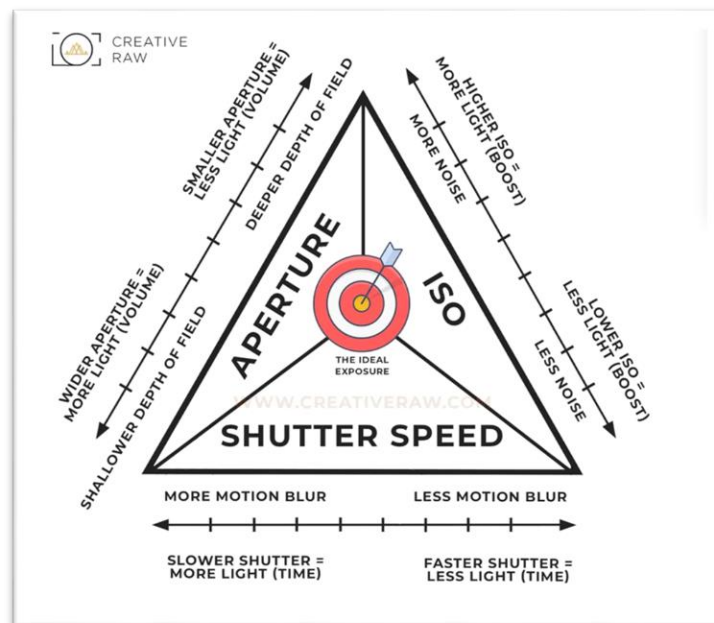
The third element is the ISO rating or light sensitivity of the film (usually rated 100, 200, 400, 800). The smaller the number of the ISO rating, the less sensitive the film is, meaning more light will be needed to reach an optimal exposure. Whereas a film with a rating of 800 is more sensitive to light, requiring a much smaller amount of light, making it optimal for shooting in low-light conditions. However, as the ISO rating increases, the graininess of the image also increases due to larger or more coarse silver halide crystal particles. The smaller ISO-rated film has much finer silver halide crystal particles, making the image quality finer and ideal for larger final image sizes.

These three elements are distinct but work in relation to each other to determine the exposure of the film. Often these elements are represented in a triangle called the “exposure

triangle” (see Figure 58). There is no standard for a “perfect” exposure or image, it all depends on the photographer’s choices and what kind of image they are trying to create. Knowing how these three components work together allows the photographer the flexibility to adapt to various situations and light conditions.

**Figure 58**

*Exposure triangle.*



For example, if the photographer is taking pictures in the evening and there is less light, the photographer can adjust the shutter speed to be slower to allow for more light. However, using a slower shutter speed means that motion will show up as a blur and might require a tripod to eliminate camera shake. So, if the photographer wants to shoot in the evening and capture action scenes without blur, they use a high shutter speed, which necessitates using a larger aperture to get enough light or using a film with a higher light sensitivity to compensate for the faster shutter speed.

There are times, like the above example, when the external light conditions might dictate what kind of settings a photographer will use. Other times, the type of camera might impose certain limitations on the kinds of images that can be made. I love pinhole photography, which is one of the simplest methods of photography, because the aperture is fixed; there is only one small hole the size of a needle prick that allows light in, which means that I only have to worry about determining how long to leave the hole exposed (shutter speed). Because of their small aperture, pinhole cameras have an amazing ability to take photos with deep depths of fields; however, they are poor at capturing motion without blurring because of the much longer shutter speeds required to get a good exposure. I love using them to take pictures of landscapes and architecture, but I would be a fool to try and take a picture of my wiggly daughters if I wanted a clear picture of them.

If we think about the syllabus through this metaphor, the three essential parts of the syllabus would be like the components of the “exposure triangle.” As mentioned before, those three components are: (1) the framing or distinguishing part, which is curricular in nature; (2) the communicative or pedagogical part, which invites certain actions; and (3) the relational part, which is centered on trust and meeting desired outcomes. Each of these sides have a spectrum of ways it is manifested, which might fluctuate from being concrete or explicit, to being more open or abstract. Like a photographer, seeing the syllabus this way presents options for how a syllabus can be constructed, yet still be a syllabus at its heart.

Each way of looking at something will afford us a unique perspective. While it may seem like I detest the current form of the syllabus, that is not the case, I merely see the singular nature in which we think of the syllabus as being limiting because it is only one possible option for how we can relate to and use the syllabus as a material.

**Every Syllabus has Pros and Cons.** In *Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas*, Denis Wood (2010) states: “We begin to see that they [maps] are servants of *this* way of thinking as opposed to *that*, they’re involved in story-telling, they’re no compendia of facts” (pg. 10). Each map promotes one reading at the expense of another, which skews the representation of the world in some way. While Wood is speaking about maps, his comments are relevant to syllabi because every approach to the syllabus is merely another way of looking and can show us one thing, but not everything, thus if we want to understand something more fully, we need multiple ways of looking. Donella Meadows, in *Thinking in Systems* (2008), which is a primer for understanding systems theory, argues that it takes careful, and often slow, observation and playing with a system to understand its parts, functions, and behaviors. For this reason, using different perspectives or lenses can be useful to see how all the elements are connected and how those relationships work together to produce a behavior or fulfill a purpose. For example, the human eye is one of the greatest lenses out there, but even with its greatness, it has limitations. The human eye cannot see into the vast expanse of outer space like a telescope or see the microscopic particles of life like a microscope (Meadows, 2008). Each type of lens allows a different part of the world to be seen and more fully understood. Likewise, each of these syllabus types create new possibilities that expand what the material is, what it can do, and what it can be used for.

I am further reminded of the way the word *standard* has three different etymologies that change the way the word is understood. My advisor, Jorge Lucero talks about these etymologies in the same keynote about Universal Learning Outcomes that he gave at the University of Florida in 2021. According to Jorge, the first etymology is German and means “to stand hard or firm. To be unshakable, immovable, as some type of testament to rigor, distinction, or—curiously



enough—the status quo (all of which are wrought with subjectivity and mostly determined by the kind of privilege a given individual enjoys)” (p. 3). Standardized testing, universal learning outcomes, and common core curriculum are practices aligned to this understanding of the word standard and imply value. The second etymology is French and is related to the idea of a flag or a rallying point. Jorge explains, “This standard again points to a fixed situation where like-minded or cast-together individuals must meet in order to know that they are in the right place (*being allegiant*) or for that matter, still alive” (p. 3). The last etymology is Latin and means to stretch or extend, which Jorge claims functions more like a runner or swimmer’s starting blocks. The standard is a “firm enough point of resistance from which an athlete can propel themselves into a high velocity sprint or leap” (p. 3). For Jorge, this third definition is the most generative in the sense that it is explosive, outward facing, and “prone to indeterminacy” (p. 3). Jorge concludes that there is nothing inherently wrong with the first two etymologies which can be useful but when applied to something like schooling can be oppressive and prevent “actually enacting and constructing a humane and liberatory education” (p. 3) when they ignore context and situation.

Every syllabus, like a map or interpretation of a word, affords certain kinds of beliefs, actions, or postures and limit others. The designer, Donald Norman (1993) echoes this sentiment and says that everything we make will afford certain activities and make others harder. Every technology imposes its mindset or way of thinking and being upon those who use it, which led Norman to declare “technology is not neutral” (p. 243). Likewise, I have surmise that the things I do as a teacher and the actions I take matter and they are not neutral but convey who I am and what I value. When we look at the variety of syllabi, we see a variety of teacher postures being taken. Biesta and Stengel (2016) suggest several postures: “teacher as authoritarian boss in relation to the docile pupil,” “teacher as emancipator of the oppressed student,” “teacher as

investor in the student as human capital,” “teacher as carer who is engrossed with the student as cared-for,” or characterized by more generic descriptions like “imperial” relations of control,” “emancipatory and democratic antiauthority relations,” or “dialogic and mutually beneficial relations of caring and cultural reconstruction” (p. 44). This brings to mind the list of metaphors that Alison Cook-Sather (2006) shared in *Education as Translation*, (i.e., a teacher is a scholar, a reflective practitioner, a researcher, a sculptor, an artist, a coach, a director, a savior, a conductor, a gardener, a dentist). All metaphors, paradigms, or genres have a coherence or logic behind them that explain the world and dictate things like truth, right and wrong, and the value of things. These models then also communicate what postures, both in mind and body, we should take.

**The Duality of Syllabi.** Things like the syllabus matter because they have a dual nature: They are things that we make and embed with our values, ideologies, and ways of being which places them in the realm of being world builders. These things in turn shape how we, our students, and others think, act, and feel about things like curriculum and pedagogy and even our world views, meaning they are posture builders. Biesta & Stengel (2016) summarize my point well: “The means of education—the ways in which we act as teachers, the things we say and how we say them, the ways in which we relate to our students and let them relate to each other—can never be thought of as mere instruments or interventions aimed at producing particular outcomes” (p. 33). The syllabus cannot be seen as being a mere document that is inconsequential because it is an active agent in shaping us, whether we are aware of it or not.

In the formal institutions of education, the trend has been to make the syllabus conform to a singular posture that centers around control, predictability, and getting tangible results. It is easy to villainize this model of the syllabus because it doesn’t fit the values, beliefs, or dreams I have for education. Sometimes I am guilty of seeing only the limitations and failures of certain

postures and not the potential they inherently have. For example, when the syllabus reflects a teacher-centered-one-directional kind of relationship I think of it as being oppressive and colonial in nature, something to never do. However, as a result of this work, I have come to recognize that each posture or type of syllabus has a time and place when it might be the right thing to achieve a certain goal. For instance, last year I went on a field trip to the Chicago Art Institute as a chaperone for one of Jorge Lucero's introduction to art courses. While there, I walked through the museum with Jorge, who studied at the art institute as an art student. I asked him if he would take me on a tour and show me the works of art that were meaningful to him when he was a student. The tour was mostly one-directional and focused mainly on Jorge's perspective, but I loved it. The same could be said for when Jorge asked my classmate, Grace, for her recommended list of restaurants in New York. The one-directional-teacher-centered approach feels appropriate when the student initiates it. However, there might be other times when the teacher might opt for this one-directional authoritarian posture because a situation demands it, like when a situation might be dangerous and there is no room for error. Like everyone else, I have my own beliefs or pedagogical esthetics that shape which iterations of the syllabus resonate the most with me, but I also recognize every iteration has its own unique affordances and limitations. The key to remember is that even if we never take a certain posture or make a certain type of syllabus, we have options.

### ***The Slipperiness of the Syllabus***

The multiple ways of seeing the syllabus have made the word "syllabus" become *slippery* for me. "Slippery" terms are words that are difficult to know the meaning of because they can be understood in a variety of ways (Buehler, 1981; Gilligan, 2016). Cynthia Resor (n.d.) defines "slippery terms" as words that:

- are defined or interpreted differently by individuals or groups; change according to one's viewpoint.
- often reflect common misconceptions about the meaning of a word
- are understood unclearly, inexactly or imperfectly by many people (but most people won't admit they don't really know what a slippery word means)
- are often overused and applied to so many different situations that they can mean everything or nothing
- shift in meaning over time, place, and culture
- can be specific or broad, depending on the context (Resor, n.d., para 1)

Resor's list illustrates a variety of ways that a word can become "slippery," but in my case the syllabus became slippery when I began studying its history and the different ways people use the term. The definition of the syllabus has shifted over time and cultural contexts, and while it has become somewhat more concretized in the last 75 years or so, there are examples of people thinking more broadly about the syllabus.

Some might consider the slipperiness of a word a bad thing because it can be difficult to know what someone is meaning when they use a slippery word. Ivan Illich (1971) for instance in *Deschooling Society*, declares that "Some words become so flexible that they cease to be useful" (p. 25). However, the syllabus becoming slippery for me has not made it less useful but in fact is a good thing because it necessitates a posture that is careful, deliberate, and thoughtful. This disposition is much like the way a person might approach walking on a slippery surface, icy path, or a mossy rock in a stream; they might carefully place their feet, feeling for firm footing as they move forward, carefully maintaining balance, ready to catch themselves if they slip. In other words, they are more fully present, carefully considering their relation to the environment they

are in, and ready to respond appropriately. The educational psychologist, Frank Pajares (1992) similarly explained that “articulate conversation must demand not only clarity of thought and expression but also preciseness of word choice and meaning” (p. 308). In other words, the slipperiness of a word necessitates the slowing down of and careful consideration of what we mean when we are using a word.

The opposite of a slippery word would be a word that is understood in the same way every time, making it singular in interpretation. These words are not ambiguous, cannot be misunderstood, and have a certain concreteness to them. As a result, we don’t have to think about it because we know what it is and what it means. This may lead us to, as Sam Rocha (2021) describes, “sling[ing] around technical terms without any concern for their meanings and histories” (p. 79). Such was the case for me in how I used the syllabus. As I have studied the syllabus, its various forms, histories, etymologies, and variations I have come to realize that my concept of the syllabus was concrete because I was ignorant of its history. What was singular in dimension has become multidimensional. I have come to see it as being something that can be seen in a variety of ways in different contexts.

**The Duality of Genres.** This brings us back to power and the potential problems of genres. Genres are tools we create to navigate the complexity of the world and aid in our social relationships by creating social expectations that allow various people to work together and find common understanding in an efficient and reliable manner with relatively little need for explanation or conversation. Bawarshi (2003) describes genres as “discursive sites” that coordinate and direct relations between “scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose” (p. 17). The clarity in purpose, motive, and expectations allows for effective communication and interactions between people, which is what Bazerman (2010) is speaking to when he said, “To communicate

effectively we need to know what kind of situation we are in, what kinds of things are being said, and what kind of things we want to accomplish” (p. xi). Genres readily help us recognize rhetorical situations and identify the best forms for communicating in that context.

Jamieson (1973) believes that our inclination towards many genres, categories, or distinctions comes from an innate need for a “frame of reference” or tool to help us make meaning and guide our thinking and actions, which is what “lures the mind to generic classification” (p. 167). I can see how the ability to take in stimulus and efficiently determine what that stimulus means and then acting in an appropriate way would be valuable to our success as a species. Our evolutionary flight or fight response relies on our instinctual ability to recognize situations and efficiently determine if the situation poses a threat or not. We don’t want to be deliberating whether a predatory animal that is charging at us is going to eat us, we want to quickly recognize the threat and fight or run. The same could be said for other situations. The librarian wouldn’t want to unfurl and read every scroll to determine which scroll is which, so they made a system to make that easier. The interaction between teachers and students is made easier by outlining what a class will be about and what the social expectations will be for that pedagogical interaction. When a person says the word “syllabus” they want there to be a shared understanding between the speaker and the receiver, so both are on the same page leading to effective communication.

Another way of describing what genres, language, and the syllabus are trying to do is make our social and learning environments become more flattened, linear, or what Robin Hogarth (2003) has called, “kind spaces” (p. 15). Hogarth, a psychologist studies things like human intuition, says there are two basic kinds of learning environments that we function in. Kind spaces are learning environments that are characterized by recurring patterns, there are

constraints, parameters and rules, and clear outcomes that define success, and quick and accurate feedback. For example, most sports are kind spaces because they have clear parameters and rules that dictate how people play the game and clear ways of determining what success or failure is (who the winner and loser is). Kind spaces lend themselves to what Hogarth (2003) calls “tacit modes of thought” (p. 7), which Hogarth claims are automatic, effortless, speedy, confidence inducing, sensitive to context, lacking conscious awareness, “approximate,” and reactive (p. 7). The other mode of being that Hogarth mentions is the “deliberate mode of thought” (p.7), which is characterized as being deliberative, requiring effort, controlled, guided, explicit, abstract, rule governed, precise, and proactive (p. 7). This mode of thought is better suited for what Hogarth calls “Wicked” (p. 15) learning environments, which is when the feedback, outcomes, or rules are nonexistent, inaccurate, unclear, or delayed. These spaces tend to be more open ended, dynamic, and complex and resist easy answers for challenges that exist within them (Webber & Rittel, 1973). Edward Weber and Anne Khademiam (2008) build on this concept and give three distinctive qualities that define wicked problems: (1) they are cross cutting, meaning they involve many different people and hierarchies of value systems which makes them have competing and conflicting in values. (2) They are unstructured, complex, and dynamic, making it likely that the problem morphs as we try to solve it. (3) They are relentless, meaning there is no solving it or finding one definitive answer. Kind spaces lend themselves to specialization and automation, where wicked spaces require more deliberate and slow thought.

The challenge we face as human beings is understanding the situations or learning environments and whether they are kind or wicked, which will determine which mode of functioning would be most appropriate. Hogarth (2003), in his article “Educating Intuition,” illustrates this point:

Clearly, the key to developing “good” intuitions is to be in a decision making environment that provides accurate and timely feedback. To the extent that the domain in which you are active is what I call “kind,” i.e., provides accurate and timely feedback, you are likely to develop accurate intuitions. However, if your domain of activity is “wicked,” i.e., feedback is missing or biased, you will have reason to question the validity of your intuitions (p. 15).

Hogarth’s description of human intuition is similar to the way Kane, et al., (2002) describe theories of action which are based on a belief that humans act with purpose in their environments and will learn from their actions, which enables them to achieve beneficial outcomes in the future. Kane, et al., (2002) claim, “As a result of the complexity of the world, humans have created models of their environment, along with a variety of theories on how to act according to those models, in order to create actions that achieve certain desired outcomes” (p. 182). A passage in Leo Tolstoy’s (1867) *War and Peace* describes this same concept:

The human intellect cannot grasp the full range of causes that lie behind any phenomenon. But the need to discover causes is deeply ingrained in the spirit of man. And so the human intellect ignores the infinite permutations and sheer complexity of all the circumstances surrounding a phenomenon, any one of which could be individually construed as the thing that caused it, latches on to the first and easiest approximation, and says, “This is the cause!” (p. 1851).

In other words, we try to make the complex world a little more kind, a little more simple, flat, and easy to understand. We do this because it makes things clear and easy. We know what posture to take. It is easy to determine if we are successful or if our posture is good or easier.



The development of the academic syllabus demonstrates how some have tried to use the syllabus to make education a kind space. In the past seventy-five years, the syllabus has gone from being a form where teachers mostly outlined a list of readings and a few key dates for important exams or assignment, to now being a document that is extremely prescriptive in the way it outlines what will be learned, how it will be learned, and how it will be assessed. The goals of education are often flattened to focus on economic growth, global competitiveness, or social cohesion (Kalin, 2012; Luke, et al., 2013). While this may make the goals for education and determining the effectiveness of teaching more clear, it can inadvertently be oppressive because it excludes indigenous and women's perspectives (Kimmerer, 2015), essentializes education in a way that ignores issues of access, embodiment, and representation of diverse students and their abilities (McRuer, 2006), and perpetuates racial inequalities and racism (Holling, 2020). It also supports a view of education as easily fixed or solved, as evidenced in books like Hattie's (2008) *Visible Learning* or Lemov's (2010) *Teach Like a Champion*. However, I think education is not a kind space. It is much more complex and wicked.

You might ask what is so wicked about education? Education is a contested space that has a variety of purposes (vocational/economic training, preparation for participating in a complex society, intellectual development, and personal or character development (Spring, 1991; Goodlad, 2004; Gage, 2009; Brint, 1998; Reese, 2000)), which often can be contradictory, compete for priority, or have varying strengths in differing contexts. These goals are largely dependent on the position of the person making them. For students it's one thing, for parents it's another, and for teachers it is something completely different. Each group tries to make the syllabus behave as a tool that aligns with their purposes and conceptions of education. Nasser Mansour (2009), who studies the role of teacher beliefs in education practices, claims that

education is complex but has three main things that shape the way a teacher teaches. According to Mansour (2009) teaching is shaped by the context (a specific school and group of students), content (the academic material, knowledge, or discipline), and the personal (the teacher's personal belief system). Teaching is a complex combination of each of those things and is not unilateral. Education is further complicated by the numerous people involved (teachers, students, parents, administrators, lawmakers, etc.). Biesta and Stengel (2016) talk about the concept of "teacher wisdom," which is the wisdom that comes from "constantly returning to the question of purpose, the question as to what is educationally desirable in this concrete situation, that teachers can build up their ability for wise, situated judgment" (p. 37). Knowing what posture or pedagogical move to make—whether to be student-centered or teacher-centered, whether to be flexible or inflexible, whether to be transparent or nontransparent, strict or friendly—all depends on knowing what we seek to achieve and how that action might help us or our students (Biesta & Stengel, 2016). In other words, there is no right answer that works in all situations all the time. There is no one goal for education that is the same for each teacher, student, or context.

We naturally rely on models, schema, or "antecedent genres" (Jamieson, 1975) to make sense of new situations, which presents a challenge for educators if the syllabus form is designed to fit a kind learning situation, not a complex one. If we return briefly to Phil Patton's (2016) excerpt regarding essence and variation of types, Patton contends that, "Aristotle opposed essence with accident—the type is the essence, its variations the accident" (p. 13). As I thought about the accidents or variations that arise across the types of syllabi, it seems that the syllabus form adapts itself to address different forces or needs of a specific context. The syllabus did not always belong to education. It was adopted into education for what it does and how it allows teachers to communicate and teach important abstract ideas about curriculum, pedagogy, and

relational expectations. The problem now is that the syllabus as a genre has gathered a set of conventions, vocabularies, and metaphors that make education a kinder space, which may not be adapted well to the specific learning context we are in.

We unintentionally carry along without their context, the meanings, logics, and values of the schema, models, and strategies we use. For example, somewhere along the way, the syllabus has been used as a contract that establishes a certain kind of logic for what education should be like. Tim Feist (2016) cautions that many common words that we use every day are embedded with assumptions and hidden meanings that we may not be aware of unless we study their contexts and histories. For Feist, this is problematic because harmful ideologies can unknowingly be passed from generation to generation and make certain assumptions about the world feel natural, which has led Feist to call for an increased criticality and conscientious towards the words we use. In Pajares' (1992) article about teacher beliefs, he shares a similar wariness of the power of words: "All words begin as servants, eager to oblige and assume whatever function may be assigned them, but, that accomplished, they become masters, imposing the will of their predefined intention and dominating the essence of human discourse" (p. 308). These authors caution us to be more deliberate in our consideration of how we function and the language we use.

While some may see the slipperiness of the syllabus as a bad thing because it complicates our communication and requires more effort on the part of the communicator, I like it because it means that I have to slow down and carefully ask myself what "syllabus" means and which particular type or mode of syllabus I am referencing. It shifts me out of a tacit or automatic mode of functioning, to a more conscious and reflective mode of functioning.

When I think of the syllabus now, I cannot help myself from sliding into a rapid-fire listing every way I have come across someone talking about the syllabus. As a result, my automatic response that has been conditioned into me over the years of engaging with the academic syllabus genre has been obliterated. Some might wonder about the value of the examples and permissions that I shared regarding ways to play with the form or conventions of the traditional syllabus, especially the examples that seem absurd, extreme, and impractical, but for me, one of their values is the way they function as “disruptakes” (Dryer, 2016). As disruptakes they caused my automatic reaction to the syllabus genre to misfire or pause, resulting in me switching into a more deliberate mode of thought. This disruption could also be described as a somatic opening because it provided me the precious time to reflect on my somatic shape, or in this case, my teacher posture, and take a more deliberate and conscious posture that was aligned to my values as a teacher.

### ***The Real Call***

There are likely to be some people who are wary of this work and view me as a troublemaker, a trickster, or someone who just wants to mess with the way things are done to cause trouble. Some might even wonder if I am calling for the destruction of the academic syllabus form or claiming that teachers who use a conventional syllabus are bad teachers. This is not the case at all. I am not trying to destroy the syllabus or cause trouble. I am not trying to say that to be a good teacher you must do x, y, or z with the syllabus or that you can't be a teacher if you don't use a syllabus. I hold a sense of respect for the collective knowledge and wisdom of the many teachers who have come before me, and I don't mean to demean or devalue any of those efforts by questioning the traditions of the syllabus. What I am doing is calling for greater awareness and responsibility for the postures that we take as teachers. I am arguing that the

syllabus is not merely a document but is an active agent that shapes how we and our students engage with each other and informs our thoughts about things like curriculum and pedagogy. I want us to see the syllabus for what it is.

In the introductory chapter, I spoke about the idea of learning to come along side or lie next to something, which was inspired by Mark Monmonier's (2018) book title, *How to Lie with Maps*. What I have been describing in this chapter is my effort to "lie with" the syllabus as a genre. When I say, "lie," I am not meaning it to be in a false sense but in the sense of coming along side or lying next to. To lie next to something or someone implies a certain amount of proximity, intimacy, or companionability. As I have been thinking of the syllabus as a genre, I have come to see some of its functions and inherent qualities. I have found ways to come along side the syllabus.

The idea of slowing down and thinking about the posture I take as a teacher comes from a desire to find attunement between the things I say, do, or make with the values and philosophies I hold regarding education and my world views. I do not want my teacher posture to be formed by the subconscious part of my being that can be influenced unknowingly by external agents, whether that be other people or genres. I don't want to become too comfortable or familiar with things like the syllabus because "when teachers repeat past practices because they are familiar or comfortable with them, without thinking of underlying theories or values that they reinforce, they may unwittingly be working toward a goal with which they do not agree" (McKay & Buffington, 2013, p. 10). This desire stems from my belief that teachers are "powerful change agents" (McKay & Buffington, 2013, p. 10) or as John Dewey (1964) described, "catalytic agents" (p. xxiv). I believe how we act, the things we say, and the things we make as teachers, matter.

It is easy to engage in a genre without considering where it came from, what remnants of logic are left over from another context which will ask me to do certain things, to think in certain ways, and to perpetuate certain beliefs or power structures. Genres exist out of the control of one person, meaning it is easy to feel both powerless and unaccountable for what they do. It feels easy to blame others for the world we live in and to say: “I am not the one in charge of determining the outcomes or standards for education,” “I didn’t make genre, I just follow it,” or “I am not the principal, dean, or administrator who has the power.” Yet each of us makes the syllabus. We all share in the making of it. As Luis Camnitzer (2020) suggests, there is a need for artists, teachers, or anyone who creates to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, sort of like Hippocratic Oath in medicine. Similarly, DéSautels and Laroche (1997/1998) contend that every teacher ought to assume responsibility for the epistemological posture they take and critically examine the actions that arise from the knowledge and representations of the world they are promoting as they create pedagogical contexts. Biesta and Stengel (2016) further speak about the need for reflective teaching practices, which they see as being a conscientious activity because the “purposes and achievements, pedagogical intent, and the teacher–student encounter are profoundly moral in conception and enactment” (p. 53). The real call I am making to you and to myself is to be more aware and responsible for what we are doing as educators, especially through things like the syllabus, which we often overlook.

When I play with the syllabus, it is less about trying to tell others what to do or reshaping the institutions I exist in, but is more about reshaping myself, at least initially. The value in having to slow down and confront these various permissions regarding the syllabus come from having to choose and not merely act or be acted upon by genre as social action. By having my foot in the realm of the classroom, I am making the construction of the syllabus my business. By

changing myself in the sphere of my influence first, I will begin to make ripple effects into the larger systems I am part of.

So, what does this do or result in? My disposition towards the syllabus has been modified as I have studied its history and the many permissions that other artists and scholars have given regarding what a syllabus can be and how it is made. I am more aware of the traditional form and practices of creating and using a syllabus, what it might communicate, and how it might disrupt that narrative. More than anything, I have been moved towards a more profound realization and commitment to embrace education as a relational and human activity. The student/teacher relationship is dynamic and is better described as a conversation where we speak to each other. It prompts me to alter my teaching practices to embody this reality. I am not proposing that everyone see a path, a restaurant list, or fire ring as a syllabus, although that might be a good thing; I am not proposing that every time we make a syllabus, we swap out the readings we used previously, or proposing that everyone think of their syllabus as art, but maybe that would be amazing if we did. I am proposing that the syllabus and the traditional form in which we conceive of and make it should be questioned, played with, and intimately aware of.

The syllabus is just a tool or a space where we make things known. It can be used to make things flatter, more kind. It can also be used to communicate things that embrace the wicked and complex world we live in. Each attempt these artists, educators, and scholars made to play with the form of the syllabus is a permission of sorts that invites others to play with and imagine a new form for the syllabus. Don't take me advocating for indeterminacy to be an escape from responsibility. As we wade through the complexity that is teaching, we need to be accountable and always asking, "What does it do for me and for students?"

While I see the syllabus as an opportunity to open possibilities for a type of teaching that is relational-reciprocal (breaks the rigidness of schooling as material), I also acknowledge that someone else could not want that. I see each way of teaching and using the syllabus as a valid way of doing things and each will have its pros and cons. The syllabus can become an important touchpoint where we are constantly reminded of our teacher posture, allowing us to align our theory to practice and practice to theory.

I conclude with something I said in the introduction to Jorge Lucero's "Conceptualist Permissions for Teacher Posture" (2023), "Knowing there are many postures of permissions can lead us to seek more on our own. We may find ourselves in moments that once seemed impossible, rigid, or unyielding and remember permissions that enable us to take a posture that makes the space, material, or moment become more pliable and yielding—helping us to make education more generous, tolerant, and embraces education as something both relational and situational at its core."



## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Four Final Metaphors

“Let us look first at that which perplexes our soul” (Goulish, 2022, n.p.).

Almost two years have passed since I heard Matthew Goulish utter these words during his and Lin Hixson’s lecture/performance titled, *14 ways of looking at the future*, yet I keep pondering on them; Like a stone that has been cast into a pond that keeps rippling instead of fading away, I hear “What perplexes your soul?” over and over again.

The word *perplexed* might be interpreted as meaning to be confused or puzzled, but in “The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology” (1995), a slightly different interpretation can be made when the etymological meaning of the word is considered. The word *perplex* is made up of two Latin root words: *per-* (completely) + *plexus* (entangled), from the past participle of *plectere* (to twine). The word *entanglement* suggests things bound together: two people wrestling, a knotted nest of a fishing line, or the emotional bonds of lovers. Maybe the things that perplex the soul, a space where “we perceive but cannot name it” (Goulish & Hixson, 2022), are different than the knot, they can never be completely undone. We are granted permission to be engaged in something for a long duration, even a lifetime, without being expected to come up with a neat solution. I am reminded of words that have *un-* or *re-* prefixes, which suggest an undoing, returning, looking again, revisiting, going back, which Rocha (2020) claims “entails a series of returns, which also implies that it is an odyssey, a journey, a pilgrimage, a trip. These metaphors imply movement” (Rocha, 2020, p. 117). Entanglement is less about the result and more about a contentedness to play with something through a series of gentle tugs, twists, loops, and little unravelings. This dissertation is a manifestation of these ideas; it is series of returns, a knot of sorts, and is my attempt to grapple with the things I find myself completely entangled or

intertwined with as a teacher, artist, and scholar. At its heart, this dissertation is about teacher practice and posture, but it is also about the syllabus.

The syllabus is an interesting material. History shows that the syllabus can be a material that is both rigid and flexible, depending on how those using it see and understand the material. In some ways, the syllabus is like a thick slab of steel that is hard to bend, it is unyielding and gives off the impression that it has always been what it is and will never change. We might call it an “impossible material,” a material that is so difficult to work with because of its massive or miniscule size, or its mundaneness makes it too hard to see in any other way, or the technical traditions that dictate how the material is used are so rigid that it can never be used differently. In his scholarship, Jorge Lucero (2021b) argues that schooling is a material that is thought of as being unmovable or impossible to change, yet it can be flexible. He states, “To be super clear, the “problem” per se is that the school is—and has always been—a pliable material that appears to be immovable” (para. 2). He goes further and says, “For the conceptual artist, the more banal, stagnant, impossible, transient, dynamic, or unconventional a material is, the more we are drawn to it” (para. 2). What is it about these kinds of banal, impossible, or unconventional materials that attract conceptual artists to them? For me, it comes from my desire to understand the world and my place within it. When I am explicitly or implicitly told to leave a material alone or only use it one way, I cannot help but wonder why. I want to play with it to discover more, not because I want to be a troublemaker, but because I seek knowledge.

When I was little my parents sat my siblings and me down and told us they were no longer going to spank us as a punishment. I took note. The next time I was asked to do something I deemed as being “unpleasant,” I said, “No.” When asked why not, I replied, “What are you going to do to me? You aren’t going to spank me.” My dad looked at me and said,

“That’s it, spanking is back on the table!” I looked at him and said, “Okay, I will go do it.” And that was that. I was merely testing the material to understand it and when I discovered where it was rigid, I was satisfied for that moment. The mundaneness, impossibility, or rigidity of the syllabus promotes a similar challenge for me, I cannot help but look for ways that it can be played with and challenged in order to think of education and teaching more broadly. I see the value of different methods of teaching, and the more postures of teaching I discover, the more possible postures I can take at any given moment to fit the dynamic environment that is schooling.

Initially, I was simply trying to understand the syllabus—this educational material—to see what it was and what I could do with it. As I studied the syllabus and played with it to test its materiality, I was unknowingly testing the materiality of myself as a teacher. I discovered that the real material I was studying and changing was not the syllabus, but me. I have talked about the rigidity of the syllabus as a material in the way that people think about, describe, and use the syllabus, but what I have come to realize is that the syllabus is just a tool, so if it is rigid, it is rigid because we, as teachers, are resistant-concrete materials in and of ourselves. We are difficult to change, to bend, to fold, to make malleable. As mentioned, I have some issues with the rigidity of the syllabus, particularly in the way that, as a form, it promotes conventions and postures that are singular in nature and seem to be good for producing one type of experience in education. Perhaps we have become so accustomed to the syllabus as being one thing that we cannot see it any other way. Likewise, we have gotten so used to who we are teachers that we cannot imagine teaching in any other way. This work I am doing is less about saying we can never take this posture or that posture towards the syllabus, instead it’s about identifying other

ways of seeing the syllabus material and using it to extend the vocabulary and generate permissions for new postures in education.

I have shared many thoughts with you about the syllabus as a material and a variety of metaphors and new permissions for engaging with it differently. I now leave you with four final metaphors that illustrate what I think the syllabus can be or do for us. I don't offer these metaphors as definitive answers about the syllabus or as an attempt to establish a "best practice" for using a syllabus, but instead the thoughts and proposals I share are the things that have emerged from my entanglement with the syllabus at this moment in time.

### **Syllabus as a Living Thing**

I used to believe the syllabus was of little importance to me as a teacher, which was symptomatic of a larger trend of overlooking the significance of other things like language, forms, metaphors, or genres. This neglect is partly due to the way these types of things are designed to make our lives easier by helping us recognize similarity in familiar situations, communicate shared meaning, and take appropriate actions without having to think too much. The familiarity and mundaneness of genres contribute to them being overlooked. There is another aspect though, which is the way these things are frequently bound up with rules, traditions, and ways of doing things that can make them feel bureaucratic and rigid. As a teacher I thought the syllabus was something I had to make, but once I sent it out to my students, I could move on to the real business of teaching. As I have studied the syllabus in more depth and examined the variety of ways that people use or conceive of the syllabus, both the examples that adhere to the more conventional way and in new or alternative ways, I have realized it is not just a meaningless thing but is a powerful agent that shapes those who make and use them.

Things like the syllabus matter because they have a dual nature: They are things that we make and embed with our values, ideologies, and ways of being which places them in the realm of being world builders. These things in turn shape how we, our students, and others think, act, and feel about things like curriculum, pedagogy, and even our world views. The educational scholars, Biesta & Stengel (2016) said something similar: “The means of education—the ways in which we act as teachers, the things we say and how we say them, the ways in which we relate to our students and let them relate to each other—can never be thought of as mere instruments or interventions aimed at producing particular outcomes” (p. 33). The syllabus cannot be seen as being just a document that is inconsequential because it is an active agent in shaping us and our postures, whether we are aware of it or not.

Whenever we make something, we inevitably embed ourselves in it in some form or another. It is like the conclusion that Juan Carlos Castro (2007) and his photography students came to when they said, “that almost everything we photograph is in some way a mapping of our perceptions onto the world around us, a bringing forth a micro-world within the macro-world” (p.75). This could extend to include everything we say, do, or make. Whenever we make a syllabus, we map ourselves and leave behind our biases, positionality, and world views.

Thinking of the syllabus as an active agent that has parts of us in it made me think, could the syllabus be a living thing? If yes, to what extent? If the syllabus is a living thing, then could the old syllabi that lived in the past still live on today? What can the syllabus do as a living thing? I propose that we view the syllabus as a living thing that is an adaptive and complex system. I take this perspective from the Genre Evolution Project, that studies literary genres as if they were a living thing with the ability to evolve and adapt to their environments. In this lens, genres are living things that react to the forces, desires, or tensions within society and can also

influence those same factors. The Genre Evolution Project (2012) further explains, “We view culture and its elements as one would the biosphere, that is, as a system in which organisms succeed or fail according to their fitness to their environment and, by their existence and success, modify their environment” (para 2). They go on to say that:

The hypothesis that cultural creations evolve in the same way as biological organisms contrasts other possible theories of genre change (for example, that new forms arise primarily as the result of individual genius [see Leavis, *The Great Tradition*]; that new forms arise primarily out of changed historical circumstances [see Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*]; that new forms arise primarily out of an inner logic of the genres themselves [see Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*]) (GEP, 2012, Para 3).

In a similar way, based on my historical inquiry, I argue that the syllabus as a genre is fluid and has evolved over time. The variations of syllabi are evidence of the way it adapts, but also modifies the environment around it. These examples show that the syllabus as a material is something that was crafted, responded to contextual situations and tensions, and can/will continue to adapt to various situations or needs in the future. It does not seem unreasonable to define the syllabus as an organic material that is complex and adaptive.

Seeing the various iterations of the syllabus together and reflecting on the evolution that has taken place over time, made me rethink the modern syllabus—that plain document that outlines what a course will be like—as something that is alive. In their book about the syllabus, Germano & Nicholls (2020), teachers who have tried to reposition the syllabus as a vital practice for teaching, ask, “Is a syllabus ever fleshy? Viney?” (p. 190), or in other words, can the syllabus be alive? Can the syllabus be the heart and structure of our courses? The thing that provides the life-giving blood or energy to our classrooms, students, and teaching?

Trying to make a non-human thing look human or take on a human quality is not new. For hundreds of years, artists have been trying to make things like wood, metal, or oil paint take on the illusion of humanness. One such example is the way sculptors used the method of *contrapposto* to mimic the way humans stand or shift their weight. The use of *contrapposto* in sculpture to make figures look more alive and realistic began during the early classical period of Greek art, around 480–450 BCE, but reemerged during the Renaissance, as shown in Donatello’s *Sculpture of Saint Mark*, in 1411–1413 A.D. (Gardner & Kleiner, 2013). It was not just in depicting the human figure in motion or shifting weight that sculptors gave the illusion of aliveness to their sculptures, but also architecture. Some have claimed that the curving horizontal lines and tilting vertical lines of the Parthenon (Temple of Athena in Athens, Greece) combine to “create a dynamic balance in the building—a kind of architectural *contrapposto*—and give it a greater sense of life” (Gardner & Kleiner, 2013, p. 127). Altshuler and Sedlock (2021), suggest that if we can think of buildings as creatures that are living, we might be able to have different relationships with them, enabling us to enjoy a friendship or companionship together. By seeing the syllabus as something alive, we might interact with it and relate to it differently.

When I define the syllabus as a living thing, it is in line with the way the American philosopher Jane Bennett, in her text *Vibrant Matter* (2010), distinguishes vibrant matter from dull matter. In her words, “I want to highlight what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency of effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” (p. ix). Bennett takes the view that vibrant matter has a “vital materiality” (p. viii) that enables it to act as “quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (p. viii). Bennett, in reference to Bruno Latour’s concept of “actant,” further explains, “An actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence

to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (p. viii). I have come to see the syllabus through Bennett’s lens as a “vibrant material” that has an energy, capacity to do work, an evolving trajectory, and a force that makes it an active agent. It is not just Bennett or me making this argument, Denis Wood an artist, author, and cartographer, describes maps as having many human-like capacities to do work. In *The Power of Maps* (1992), Wood states:

Power is the ability to do work. Which is what maps do: *they work*. They work in at least two ways. In the first, they operate *effectively*. They work, that is.... *They don’t fail*. On the contrary, they succeed, they achieve effects, they get things done. *Hey! It works!* But of course, to do this, maps must work in other ways as well, that is, *toil*, that is, *labor*.

Maps sweat, they strain, they apply themselves. The ends achieved with so much effort?

The ceaseless reproduction of the culture that brings them into being” (p. 1).

Some may still balk at the idea of the syllabus being a living thing, but I see in Wood’s description of maps a logic for how the syllabus can be seen as a living thing. Essentially, the syllabus has the capacity to do work, toil, or labor to promote or perpetuate a certain ideology, make it a living thing. If thinking of the syllabus as “living” is too much, then maybe we can define it is a vibrant material that has the power to, as Bennett (2010) states, “aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect” (p. IV).

I have wondered if syllabi have vibrancy or life in them because they were touched or made by humans. As a material, they hold a living reflection of the people who wrote them. In the course of this research, I have read many syllabi, and while at times it can be easy to be lulled into a sense that these syllabi are innocuous, I have come to realize that even the most seemingly inert syllabi have an aliveness to them—they actively communicate, advocate, or shape those



who read them, even if that action is to simply put the reader to sleep. There are, however, some syllabi that are so provocative I can't help but want to read the readings, follow their course, and discover the knowledge that these teachers have laid out. They point out the numerous paths or ways of thinking or being in the world and beckon me to follow.

Thinking of the syllabus as something alive may be a challenging viewpoint, as the syllabus is not breathing, it does not think, or have the other needed qualifications to be alive like a person, animal, or plant. In this regard, I agree; the syllabus is not a living thing on level with human beings or other living creatures. What I am doing, though, is making a proposition that things like genres, metaphors, forms, or other similar materials, including the syllabus, can be alive in a more figurative sense because they have the capacity to do things in this world. They can evolve and take on an energy unto themselves, thus they are things that we need to care for and take accountability for their actions. If we can think of the syllabus as an active or living thing, then maybe we can also think of it as a mirror, similar to how Altshuler and Sedlock (2021) argue architecture can be a mirror “that allows us to evaluate ourselves in an ever forgiving, nonjudgmental way...that would help us address some of the crises facing humanity at this moment in time” (p. 15).

### **Syllabus as a Mirror**

There might be some who take issue with seeing the syllabus as an active agent and something of importance because there are plenty of teachers who get along fine without a syllabus. Others might wonder if I am claiming that you cannot be a good teacher if you do not use a syllabus or use it in a certain way. I am not claiming that a teacher cannot be a good teacher if they don't use a syllabus. What I am claiming is the syllabus can be a mirror that can show or reveal things about us as teachers.

When we write or create, we breathe vitality into our ideas by making them exist in a form outside ourselves. When I write my thoughts they stay there on the page where I can return to them, ponder them, allow them to grow and evolve, but when I keep them in my head, they seem to dissipate, flee, die off, or seep into my subconscious in a way that is hard for me to tell where they have gone. This is why I claim the syllabus is a mirror, because it allows us to touch and see through the syllabus to reveal much about our field's practices, ideologies, and postures as teachers. By writing a syllabus, we put our ideas out there where we can see it, others can see it, and we can get feedback about what is happening within us. Maybe the difference between those who use a syllabus and those who don't is that those using them make known their beliefs in a physical way that can be seen by themselves, their students, and others (administrators, colleagues, parents), which might allow them to be more aware, self-reflective, and responsible for their actions as a teacher.

At times I have found it hard to be aware or reflective because so much of who we are exists in our subconscious being and is intangible. Creating a syllabus provides the chance for a teacher to be more self-reflective about their teaching practices in a way by making the intangible tangible. As someone who wants to be aware and accountable for the actions I take, the syllabus is valuable because it is a space or touch point where I can be more self-aware and reflective.

It feels important to constantly remind ourselves that what we do has real impact on the world around us and the things we make, like the syllabus, are contributing to building worlds and shaping the way knowledge, perspective, and stories are valued and remembered. The syllabus is not neutral but serves those who make it. As Postman and Weingartner (1969) argued, the curriculum, or what is learned in school, is less about what is taught and more about how it

was taught, necessitating a view that considers the whole experience of a student as being curriculum. This is in line with Marshall McLuhan's (1964), well known adage, "the medium is the message"(p.7). McLuhan's sentiment suggests that how theory or conceptual meaning is communicated becomes the vital factor in determining what is learned or communicated. In other words, whether someone uses a syllabus or not, or whether someone aligns their teaching practices to what they state in their syllabus or not, every teacher has a teacher posture which reflects their ideologies, values, and practices about education and that posture will shape the decisions they make. What we do as teachers matters.

If the syllabus was seen this way, maybe more teachers would feel they have responsibility for what it does and the way it perpetuates power, systemic inequality, and oppression in schools. Building on this point, Kalin (2012) says, "we need to take responsibility for our roles in creating and perpetuating the conditions of the institutions we are complicit in, benefit from, and take action against through our compromises, self-censorship, critique, and the rewards we are driven by" (pgs. 45-46). Similarly, speaking to a group of web designers, Jonathan Harris (2009) says that "we must find the humanity in the machine and learn to love it. If we decide the humanity does not yet exist there [in the web] in the ways we expect, then we must create it" (Our Digital Crisis section, para. 13). Harris further says, "A language is basically a system for expressing ideas," and "when the world changes, sometimes a new language is needed to handle that change" (Language section, para. 2). As Harris seems to imply, we should interrogate the language and metaphors we are using and determine if they are making the kinds of spaces or experiences we want for education and if we find that the languages or metaphors are inadequate or do not exist, we need to (re)create them. Teachers are world builders and we

need to create, learn, and use language, genres, and forms that shape the spaces and environments we want to see.

I felt a sense of urgency to take up the syllabus as a subject to study because I wanted to be more conscientious and responsible for what I was doing as an educator. This in turn comes from a belief that teachers and schools are important cultural spaces and agents that shape our world. I want to make sure I know what I am doing and why, so I am not unintentionally harming others by following what someone else said was “best” practice or merely teaching in a certain way because that was how I was taught (see DéSautels & Larochelle, 1997/1998; McKay & Buffington, 2013). DéSautels and Larochelle (1997/1998) contend that educators can break the cycle of teaching how they were taught by adopting critical practices that appraise, reflect, and align their teacher postures with what they do and say. Likewise, McKay and Buffington (2013) claim critical self-reflective practices can lead to increased positions of power and awareness as teachers examine their own biases and assumptions. To further illustrate this point, Biesta & Stengel (2016) state, “We always also need to judge whether they [our actions] are educationally appropriate—which requires that we reflect on what our students might learn or pick up from the ways in which we organize, arrange, and enact education” (p. 33). The work I have been doing with the syllabus is my attempt to be more aware and conscious of the things I make and engage with as a teacher.

At times I have had an inclination to make changes in education on a larger scale, the kind that changes the world. After I watch movies like, *To Sir with Love* (1967), *Freedom Writers* (2007), or *Dead Poets Society* (1989), I can’t help but want to be a teacher who comes in with some new radical approach that is wildly successful at connecting with the students who were previously despondent or failing. But that desire has changed. I now have a desire to work

on the micro level, starting with myself and the things like the syllabus, that lie at my feet metaphorically speaking. I realize that in the local (myself and the things I make) is where I have the most power or greatest sphere of influence to enact change. The syllabus is not the flashiest of topics to discuss in terms of educational reform, but perhaps that is why treating the syllabus as an artistic material is so radical, because it treats the most mundane thing we do as a teacher as vital and critical to becoming a more conscientious teacher.

Sometimes it's easy to forget the power that each of us has to influence the world and those around us. A friend once wrote me a note that said, "You don't see it Kaleb, but you have a greater impact on the people around you than you realize." The work and influence of a teacher is not always immediate, meaning there is some indeterminacy to evaluating one's impact as teacher. Teachers also work within a system or landscape that is dynamic, complex, and full of tensions. The syllabus is not something that a teacher has full control over, but it is made through collective and social actions. Thus, it is hard to take full responsibility for it because it was made collectively. It can also be hard to be self-reflective because it means looking inward and accepting our faults, prejudices, biases, and power. It is easier to look outward, instead of inward, when it comes to taking responsibility for one's actions. To a degree, it is impossible to extricate ourselves from our own experience. The external world is always filtered through our unique perspectives that are shaped by our emotions, experience, culture, and heritage. Maybe this is what Frantz Fanon (1967) means when he asks, "how do we extricate ourselves?" (p. 12).

Becoming self-aware is not an easy thing to do because much of who we are, how we function, and our impact on the world is hard to see. For example, our physical posture may seem simple on the surface but it's actually quite complex. Lee, et al., (2021) argue that even the most basic movements are anything but simple; in reality, posture is the result of refined

coordination between the body's neural, biochemical, and muscular-skeletal systems and is shaped by a dynamic interaction with an ever-changing environment. This all happens automatically and subconsciously, allowing us to focus on other things and still maintain a poised balanced body position, while using little energy and preventing pain or long-term deformity (Rantala, et al., 2018; Carini, et al., 2017; Todd, 1920, 1931). Similarly, Starr (2019), the somatics instructor, claims that our somatic shape, the “totality of our being” (p. 48), is mostly outside of awareness. Who we are and how we think, feel, and act is an amalgamation of lived experience, our family history, the trauma and joy we have felt, our cultural norms, nationality, religion, geography sex, gender, race, social class, and so on (Starr, 2019). Likewise, it is hard to understand all the things that shape our teacher posture. Things like curriculum, pedagogy, our conceptions of teaching, learning, and knowledge are abstract in nature and exist mostly in the realm of thought, meaning they shape how we think, act, and feel from behind the scenes. It is for this reason that language and metaphors are so essential they push thought into the physical world. In the journal *The Systems Thinker*, Fred Kofman (1992) illustrates the power of language:

Language can serve as a medium through which we create new understandings and new realities as we begin to talk about them. In fact, we don't talk about what we see; *we see only what we can talk about*. Our perspectives on the world depend on the interaction of our nervous system and our language—both act as filters through which we perceive our world...the language and information systems of an organization are not an objective means of describing outside reality—they fundamentally structure the perceptions and actions of its members (Kofman, 1992, The Language of Business section).

The syllabus requires us to make our thoughts about education known to others and ourselves. It exposes our mental models to the light of day and makes them more visible. Just as we need a mirror in order to see how our hair looks in the morning, we can use the syllabus as a way to see our intellectual or conceptual selves.

This process is not unlike the process that Daniel Kish (2015), who is blind, uses to navigate the world. Kish uses a process he calls “flash sonar” which he describes as “Flashes of sound [made by clicking his tongue] that go out and reflect from surfaces all around me, just like a bat sonar, and return to me with patterns and pieces of information much as light does for you” (03:28). Seeing by echolocation or “flash sonar” is a process of writing and reading, putting out information, and receiving it back. This in turn is what Rocha (2020) was speaking to when he said, “Thinking about things “out there” often results in more intimate thoughts about what is “in here”” (p. 51). In *Ideology and curriculum*, Michael Apple (1979/2018), citing Stuart Hall, makes a similar point, “The transformations of self-identity are not just a personal matter. Historical shifts out there provide the social conditions of existence of personal and psychic change in here” (p. x). Each of us is locked into our own individual experience and will never fully extricate ourselves from it, but the syllabus can enable us to overcome that and be able to see ourselves more clearly by sharing our internal thoughts with others.

If we do not find ways to reflect on our teacher posture in a conscious way, we might metaphorically find we are slouching, or our posture has become deformed without realizing it. If we do not find ways to critically examine our teacher posture, how can we tell for sure if what we are doing is aligned with our values and desired outcomes. Cramer, et al., (2018) have been doing research about what happens when people become more aware of their posture. They found that when people are made aware of their posture, they practice healthier postures, which

in turn leads to less pain and general health improvements. It is not coincidental that dance studios and weight-lifting gyms often place mirrors around the space so that the dancers or bodybuilders can carefully watch their form and posture while performing their dance routines or workouts. Seeing posture in a mirror provides instantaneous feedback to ensure the proper posture and techniques are used. Many athletes practice in a similar way. They carefully learn footwork, body positioning, body mechanics, and hand-eye coordination by performing drills over and over under the careful eye of a coach or by watching themselves on video.

Another example of how certain tools or accessories can alter a person's posture is one I experienced recently after buying noise-canceling earbuds for the first time. The earbuds are really nice for listening to music or audiobooks, but the most surprising thing is they have enabled me to become aware of things I previously had not realized about my body. When I activate the noise canceling feature, it cuts out most external sounds, which unintentionally made my internal body sounds more audible. I could hear my breathing, my heartbeats, and the loud pounding noise of my feet walking. I had no idea how loud the impact of my natural walk was, but without all the stimulus of other sounds, these sounds were made known to me. As a result, I found myself trying to step lighter. I also became more attuned and aware of my cardiovascular health, when I could hear the slight strain in my breathing caused by my brief jog across the road. When I removed my earbuds, the world with all its noise returned, and I could no longer hear the sounds of my heart or breathing. My attention was drawn back to other things and the quiet internal sounds of my body's system slid back into the space of the unseen.

This brings me back to the metaphor at hand, the syllabus as mirror. The syllabus, like a mirror, or like my earbuds, is an external tool that reveals parts of our teacher posture or shape that may go unnoticed, are hidden away, or are so abstract we don't even know they are there.



When we write a syllabus, we reveal parts of who we are as teachers. We reveal our thoughts on curriculum and what knowledge is worth knowing, which in turn says something about us and our world view, our culture, and our values. We bring forth thoughts on pedagogy, which shows how we conceive of learning and the construction of knowledge and wisdom. We define what it means to be a student what it means to be a professor and how we will use the power we have. In other words, the syllabus becomes a touch point where we can make the conceptual parts of our nature more tangible.

### **Syllabus as Proxy for Myself**

In research or education, it seems we are constantly asking: What are the outcomes? What does this thing do or result in? What new knowledge is revealed by it? But maybe we also ought to ask, what did this research do to the researcher? In *Making and being*, Jahoda and Woolard (2019) contend that “Artists are transformed in their process of making, experimenting, and researching. This transformation unfolds over time, often over months and years. As you make projects, you are facilitating a material transformation, but you are also facilitating a transformation of yourself” (p. 97). Starr (2019) makes a similar claim, “you are the primary raw material of your creation, whether your vision is of an effective curriculum, changed labor laws, satisfying relationships and successful collaborations, or a film, poem, or sculpture. (p. 48). In other words, the syllabus has just been a proxy for facilitating a transformation of myself. I am the material being studied, played with, and tested to see how it can be made pliable. As I mentioned previously, sometimes it is hard to study ourselves because we are too close and unable to extricate ourselves from ourselves; having a proxy or medium to peer through can help us see ourselves more clearly.

In a sense, this dissertation is both a study of the syllabus and a personal narrative of me trying to understand myself and what it means to be a teacher. The impetus of this dissertation was a desire to find a teaching posture that would enable me to hold onto my personal beliefs and values, while still functioning in the institutions of schooling, which was challenging for me at times. When I was a middle school art teacher, I often felt tension or disequilibrium between my goals and the goals, practices, and postures of my instructional coach, principals, or other teachers. While there are many examples I could give, I will use one to illustrate this disequilibrium more specifically.

In the first school I taught at, my principal required every teacher to post their learning outcomes for the day using a sort of adlib sentence where we would write, “Students will know [fill in the blank]” and “Students will be able to [fill in the blank].” The intent was to make learning more visible by clearly indicating to students what the learning goal was for that day. This comes from a linear or teleological understanding of learning where you start with the end goal and work backwards, figuring out each step the teacher/students need to take to get to that end goal (Fantauzzacoffin, et al., 2012). The teacher creates assessments that give timely feedback to assess if the learning goal has been met and if not, what the next logical step would be to close that gap. As part of my school’s leadership team, I was asked to create a PowerPoint and train other teachers in this model of teaching that demonstrates this type of thinking (see Figure 59). Using preassessments, formative assessments, and post assessments, I could tell you using numerical data how many students were proficient in a specific learning goal before my instruction and where they ended up after my instruction. This model can be extremely attractive because it does a very good job at achieving specific outcomes, making learning something that

can be observed, measured, and quantified, making it easier to show results to others and quantify the success of a teacher.

**Figure 59**

*Illustrations of linear teaching model*

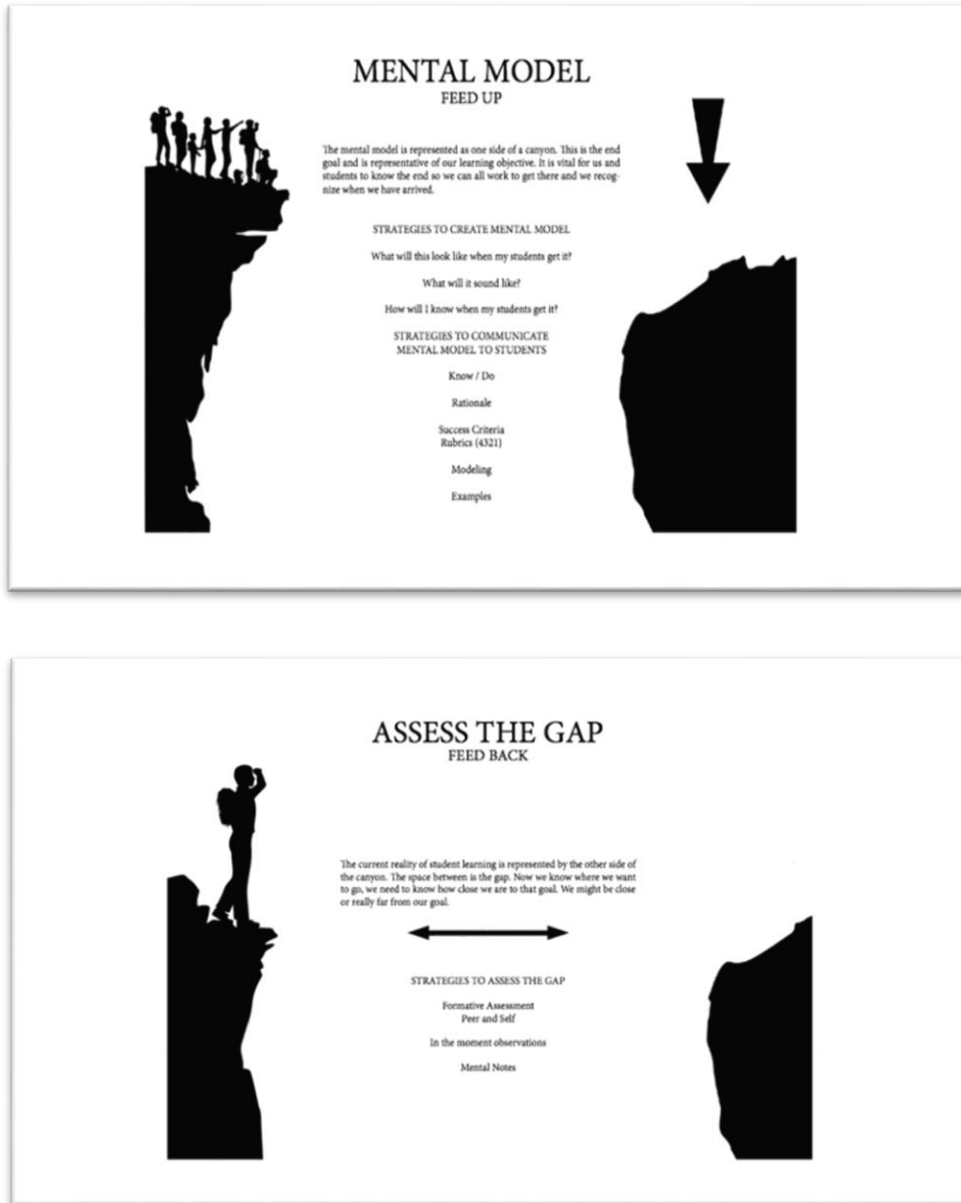


Figure 59 (contin.)

## ATTACK THE GAP

FEED FORWARD




Once you know where your students are attack that learning gap. The gap is closed by selecting and implementing the appropriate teaching strategies.

STRATEGIES TO ATTACK THE GAP

- Explain
- Model
- Facilitate practice
- Engagement
- High order thinking
- Reflection
- Assessment

## REASSESS THE GAP

FEED BACK



You have tried some stuff out. Check and see if it is working to close the gap. Where are we now? How much further do we still have to go?

STRATEGIES TO ASSESS THE GAP

- Formative Assessment
- Peer and Self Review
- Reflection
- In the moment observations
- Mental Notes

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## GAP CLOSED

FEED FORWARD



Your students have closed the gap. They and you both know they were successful. Yaaaay! Congratulations on your success at being a teacher. Now what? You may still have students that are not there yet or you have everyone and are ready to move on. You may need to have extensions for those that made it or go find a new gap to close.

STRATEGIES TO KNOW WHEN GAP IS CLOSED

- Summative Assessments
- Presentations
- Reflection
- Extensions
- Mental Model Achieved

12

While this model has a place and does some things well, it also has flaws. It relies on knowing beforehand exactly what you are trying to achieve or where you want to end up. The end goals are usually singular in nature and typically reflect the perspective of the teacher, not the students. It values learning that can be observed, measured, and quantified, which suggests that what we can measure is more important than what we cannot (Meadows, 2008). It inherently flattens education, making it linear, predictable, and controllable, or in other words, it tries to make education become a “kind” learning environment, which is when there are recurring patterns, established and visible constraints, parameters and rules, clear outcomes that define success, and quick and accurate feedback (Webber & Rittel, 1973; Hogarth, 2003; Epstein, 2019).

I tried this model for a while but there was always something about it that never felt right. What I could sense early on, but not name, was a sense of disequilibrium or maladjustment between my personal conceptualization of teaching and the systems or practices I found myself within. I was sensing that turning education into a “kind” learning environment was ignoring the complexity, tensional, and interwoven reality of our world. As Meadows (2008) states, “The danger is we think we can use systems to predict and control” (p. 166). There is a sort of inherent oppression that occurs when education is made into a “kind” space because it tries to flatten down the many goals for education down to one model and perspective. What goals, learning, or knowledge get pushed to the side because they are not easy to observe or quantify? Does it leave room to learn new things, things that are unknown, or undiscovered? How does that type of open-ended learning fit within the teleological/visible learning model I shared? What about students and their diverse needs, abilities and interests? Achieving success or equilibrium may be

easiest in “kind” situations, but most of life and what makes us human is not this simple. Along these lines, James Gleick (1987), a science historian, once declared,

Linear relationships are easy to think about: the more the merrier. Linear equations are solvable, which makes them suitable for textbooks. Linear systems have an important modular virtue: you can take them apart and put them together again—the pieces add up. Nonlinear systems generally cannot be solved and cannot be added together...

nonlinearity means that the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules...that twisted changeability makes nonlinearity hard to calculate, but it also creates rich kinds of behavior that never occur in linear systems (as cited by Meadows, 2008, p. 91).

When education is made to be too linear or kind the richness and diversity of nonlinear learning are lost which is what led to the discomfort and dissatisfaction that I have discussed.

This sense of disequilibrium I was feeling led to a moment of crisis where I knew I had a choice to make: I could (A) choose to conform to the systems and practices that were being offered to me by my instructional coach, principal, researchers, other teachers, and even forms like the syllabus, but risk losing myself and the personal values and ideas I held about the nature of learning and teaching; (B) I could resist and fight against the practices and beliefs I saw as being used in a way to make the system conform to my views, but risk getting reprimanded or fired; (C) I could leave education altogether; or (D) I could find a way to exist in between, a way of being in the system but not losing myself. I decided to choose option D because I desperately wanted to find a way to survive in teaching because I love education and believe in it, despite all its failures and imperfections.

### *A Journey for Equilibrium*

Finding equilibrium between ourselves and our environment is a natural human desire. In *John Dewey on Education*, Reginald Archambault (1964), the editor, claims that John Dewey believed, “The human organism seeks a state of rest or equilibrium. It seeks an adjustment to its environment” (p. xv). Likewise, I tried to find a way to exist in education, to find equilibrium. There are a variety of ways one can achieve equilibrium. Meadows (2008) demonstrates one way this can be done using a home’s heating/cooling system. In the example, there are two opposing forces: (A) the desired temperature of the homeowner, versus (B) the actual temperature. When  $A=B$ , equilibrium is achieved. To ensure equilibrium, a homeowner will set their thermostat to a desired temperature so when the actual temperature of the home drops or increases above the desired temperature, the thermostat will cue the furnace or air conditioner to turn on, restoring equilibrium between A and B. In this example, equilibrium is achieved by changing B (the actual temperature of the house), not A (the desired temperature of the homeowner). However, there is also the possibility that equilibrium could be achieved by the homeowner taking a more unconventional way of creating equilibrium by doing something like putting a sweater on, which allows for them to be comfortable at a new temperature. Success in these scenarios is defined by the achievement of equilibrium between desire and actual temperature.

In my situation the easiest thing would have been to go along with the system, but that meant giving up the things about education that felt important, things like involving students in education, leaving room for open-ended learning, and play. What I knew was my conception, philosophy, or posture towards education was not congruent with the models that were being given. Those models in turn were used to achieve certain goals or purposes, I thought if I could come up with an alternative way of achieving the goals that others had, but in a way that also

achieved my goals, then I could find equilibrium. This notion is like the concept of “equifinality,” which in systems theory is the principle that “systems can reach the same goal through different paths” (Montuori, 2011, p. 414). The concept of equifinality might suggest that the path one takes doesn’t matter because you end up at the same place, but the way I see it, the path matters because each journey will be inherently different. Each path will offer its own unique experience, which has the potential to change the person walking it. Maybe my argument falls apart because one might argue that in that case a person really is not ending up at the same place, but maybe that is my point. If I can outwardly achieve success or the desired goals that others have for education and accomplish something else in the process, something aligned to my goals, is equilibrium restored?

Part of my problem was my own ignorance and lack of vocabulary or institutional knowledge regarding the purposes of education and the systems of education. I realized I needed to learn more about education as a system, its history, what the various goals or purposes are, and how other people have navigated this situation. The logic I had was similar to something Meadows (2008) mentions regarding systems: “Once we see the relationship between structure and behavior, we can begin to understand how systems work, what makes them produce poor results, and how to shift them into better behavior patterns” (p. 1). I thought if only I could understand the system, I could find a way to change it or exist within it. This set off a journey of me searching for new vocabularies and permissions that would make new postures possible, that would help me achieve equilibrium between myself and the systems of education. I read all sorts of books about things like:

- the history of public education and the purposes of education (see Spring, 1991; Goodlad, 2004; Gage, 2009; Brint, 1998; Reese, 2000),



- critical pedagogy (see Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Postman & Weingartner, 1969),
- the history of how teachers taught (see Gage, 2009; Cuban, 1984),
- the open-classroom model of education (see Cuban, 2004),
- constructivist learning theories (see Piaget, 1954; McLeod, 2018; Dewey, 1964; Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Kirschner, et al., 2006; Bada & Olusegun, 2015),
- motivation and self-directed learning (see Mitra, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Pink, 2011; Ariely, 2010, 2016),
- contemporary arguments about what education should be (see Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016; Robinson, 2015),
- teacher memoirs (McCourt, 2005; Kohl, 1994),
- and institutional leadership (see Marquet, 2012; Wiseman, et al., 2013).

The problem I ran into was, the more I read, the more my list of possibilities for what education could or should do grew, which resulted in me feeling less and less sure about my educational goals. It seemed that everybody had a different idea of what education should be or what good teaching was. I had been looking for theories or models that would answer the tension and disequilibrium I felt, but none of them accomplished this.

If we go back to the example of the thermostat and imagine that two people live in the house, achieving equilibrium is more challenging because there are now two people who may have differing ideas about what the ideal temperature should be, leading to a war of the thermostat. Now imagine you have ten people living in the house, arriving at a point where everyone is satisfied with the temperature is virtually impossible. That is how education felt for me. For example, one person might want education to prepare students for future jobs, another

might say education should develop the character of a person, another might want education to make good citizens, and on and on. It is likely then that at any given time, one person's ideal will be in a state of disequilibrium with someone else's desired outcome, while simultaneously achieving equilibrium with someone else's.

Even if all those parties were to come to an agreement as to what the desired goals should be, achieving it is not as simple as flipping on the air conditioner. Knowledge is not something that we can just pass along to someone else. While teachers have first-hand knowledge and wisdom as to what kind of things can help a student learn, there is always a certain amount of guessing, indeterminacy, and imperfection in education. Education is also unlike the thermostat where you can immediately hear the furnace turn on, blow air, and watch the temperature change. Learning happens inside of students, meaning a teacher cannot always see the results of their teaching. Some learning takes time, years, and even a lifetime to fully see. In other words, education can be seen as a "wicked space" (Webber & Rittel, 1973; Hogarth, 2003; Epstein, 2019) or "tensional landscape" (Backhaus, 2003) because the goals or purposes are not always clear, they change, or are contested. The feedback systems are not always accurate or do not happen in a timely fashion. Essentially, education is a complex space that is in constant flux where many different value hierarchies and cultural systems intersect and vie for power.

The American organizational theorist, Russell Ackoff (1979), once called "dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other...messes" (p. 99). It is natural to want to clean up the mess, to create meaning and order out of chaos. I need that. I think everybody needs that. We cannot tread water or stand in limbo forever; we need something firm and sure to grab onto. The way we use metaphors and genres illustrates our desire to turn complexity and chaos into order. Likewise, if we go back to

Dewey's comment about the human desire to find equilibrium with its environment, it makes sense that we would then try and make our environments as kind as possible. Kind spaces make it easy to function, easy to assess success, easy to know who you are and what your role is. My searching has been about wanting to find something firm to stand on. To know and feel secure about who I am and what I'm doing as a teacher.

Throughout this dissertation I have expressed a desire to extend the vocabulary, the permissions, and possibilities for how we conceive of and use the syllabus, which is all to say how we think, act, and feel as teachers. I wanted to find a posture that would resolve the tensions I felt inside, which would allow me to stay in education. The idea of finding one posture that will resolve all the issues within education is somewhat naïve, but can you blame me when this is the model of thinking that is so predominant in education and in our society? Movies like *To Sir with Love* (1967) and *Freedom Writers* (2007) are inspiring, and to be honest, played a partial role in why I wanted to go into education. When I was given books like Hattie's (2008) *Visible Learning* or Lemov's (2010) *Teach Like a Champion*, I was again shown that there are "best practices" or "right ways" of teaching and if you want to be a champion teacher too you need to teach in these ways. The teachers, coaches, and principals I worked with all had "their way" of doing things, so when I felt some disconnect or friction, I was made to think I simply hadn't discovered my way yet, but if I searched hard enough, I would find it. As cliché or ridiculous as it may sound, I found "my" way by studying the syllabus, but it wasn't what I thought it would be when I started this process.

To explain more, I want to use a metaphor of strings. If we consider the landscape of teaching, there are many tensions that a teacher has to concern themselves with (the numerous purpose for education, what curriculum to teach, what methods to use, whether to use teacher-

centered or student-centered models, whether to be strict or flexible, how to grade, how to work with the supplies or budget, how to meet the needs of students within their abilities, and so on). Each of these items is like a string that pulls on a teacher and vies for the teacher's sole attention. There are various ways that one can handle these tensions.

One teacher might identify out of this chaotic mess of strings which ones are the most meaningful to them and combine them together into one larger strand or rope and let go of all the others, this way they may only have one or two ropes they are holding onto, making their life much easier. A different teacher might look at the same entangled mess and make a completely different set of ropes. Sometimes there are ropes that have been made for us and these ropes are strong, durable, and have great strength to pull in their desired direction, resulting in people making new ropes to pull against these. Everyone is attached to something and has their own way or posture for responding to these strings and the tensions that are created as they pull against them.

My early experiences as a teacher might be described as having two primary strings pulling on me: my own string and the institutional string. The institutional string was much more robust and had the power to pull hard against me. As I tried to hold onto my string, the institutional string pulled so hard that I felt my posture as a teacher being contorted, causing pain. My initial response was to try and pull back, but that failed because my string wasn't fully formed, my goals or theories of education were not so clear at first, as a result, I couldn't resist the power of the institutional pull. For a while I tried not resisting but hated how that felt. I tried to appease the institutional goal while trying to bend or pull it in slightly different ways, sort of like the way I was taught not to swim against a rip tide but to swim on an angle with it until I was out of the current. As I was studying other educational scholars, I would adopt their strings and

test out what they were like, but each string I tested did some things well and other things not so well. I kept searching for the string or combination that would feel right among all the tensions that were pulling on me but could never find the right combination or posture that felt right.

To continue this metaphor, but in context with the syllabus, each purpose, way, metaphor, or conception of the syllabus is just a string. Each string has a logic or hierarchical value system that creates meaning and purpose by defining what knowledge is within that system, what knowledge is most valuable, how to best access that knowledge, what the roles of the teachers and student will be, and so forth. Initially, I saw some of these threads as problems that needed to be resisted or cut out altogether. For example, the syllabus being seen as a contract presents education in a certain way that is not attuned to my sensibilities. Part of my intent in studying the syllabus was to see if there was some other way that the syllabus could be conceived that might give an alternative view that I could pull on to resist the syllabus as contract. While this may make a new way of teaching possible, it still falls into a sort of binary or flattened view of education because I was trying to find the postures that fit my experiences, values, and beliefs and advocate only for them.

As I studied the history of the syllabus, read the current literature, looked at lots of examples of people playing with the syllabus, and imagined speculative syllabi myself, I found my list of possible ways of seeing the syllabus had become quite vast and diverse. This in turn caused me to step back to consider the full array of possibilities. This is not unlike the way Meadows (2008), in her primer on systems theory, claims that building a model of a system can change people's paradigms because it "takes us outside the system and forces us to see it whole" (p. 164). This in turn sounds very much like the way Goldie and Schellekens (2010) describe art as being a way to present actual nature as a second nature, which allows us to reflect on our

human experiences in a removed way. As I looked at these various approaches to the syllabus through an artistic lens and tried to suspend my own esthetics or values and merely ask what this thing does or what it could do. I began to see the syllabus and education like I never had before. As a result, my paradigm for teaching was completely altered.

### *A New Posture*

What I saw from this removed vantage point was a complex landscape. I began to see that every approach or posture one could take through the syllabus had a system of logic that made it specifically tailored to address a tension or need in education in a certain way. At certain times, one approach may be the best one to achieve a specific goal, while at other times a different posture may be best. Each variation of the syllabus affords certain kinds of beliefs, actions, or postures and limit others, which means each way is just as equally valid as the next. At times I am guilty of talking in absolutes when it comes to teaching. For example, I sometimes find myself saying, “Lecturing is never a good way to teach” or “students should always be involved in the creation of a syllabus.” But now I am becoming wary of words like “always” and “never” because there may be a time or context when that posture is the right thing. My previous singular understanding of the word “syllabus” being a mundane document that teachers read the first day of class is now a multifaceted thing. Every time I hear the word syllabus, I have this long list of meanings that flash through my mind, which in turn remind me that the teaching posture I most want to have is amorphous and flexible, so that I can take any posture that is right for the moment.

This new posture of teaching is fundamentally like Aoki’s (1986/2004) concepts of “indwelling” or “tensionality,” only instead of a teacher existing between the worlds of the “curriculum as planned” and “curriculum as lived,” it extends to the numerous tensions that exist

in education. It also recognizes as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) claim, that “We are, in important ways, what the situation ‘pulls out’ of us (p. 26). It embraces education as something that is “chronically imperfect, incomplete, and unfinished probes” (Philippis, 2009, p. 9). The principles of balance, diversity, and adaptability are at its core. It tries to strike a balance between the needs of societies and the desire of students, which was informed by what John Dewey (1964) once said:

Education must provide for the development of the individual and for his participation in society. It can not do this by neglecting his individuality by forcing rigid patterns of socially approved behavior upon him, for if it does it will prevent him from being creative, and hence block the only avenue for his eventual contribution to society. Just as freedom and discipline are interrelated, individual expression and social necessity must be considered together” (p. xxi).

This new posture must have reflective and responsible thought at its core and “examine alternate ends-in-view, hypothesize, deliberate, perform a “dramatic rehearsal in the imagination,” and consider the “long-range consequences” (Dewey, 1964, p. xx). It celebrates complexity and pays attention to what is important, not just what is quantifiable (Meadows, 2008). It treats education as “a dialogic encounter that, like all dialogue, entails results that are ultimately all the more valuable for their uncertainty” (Seitz, 2019, p. 459). It agrees with Jahoda and Woolard (2019) who declared in *Making and Being*, “that an education in art must be as much about ways of being in the world as it is about ways of seeing and ways of making and exhibiting projects in the world” (p. 30). It embraces that, “Each way of seeing allows our knowledge of the wondrous world in which we live to become a little more complete” (Meadows, 2008, p. 6). It seeks less to give “right answers” but instead celebrates “right questions.” It allows for moments of using

“kind” models if the situation calls for it, but it never casts the other threads to the side. It requires slowness at times to ensure that each response is attuned to the values that are most dear.

This may sound great, but how does one come to find a state of rest or equilibrium in a wicked condition? One must become more accustomed to being unbalanced, in motion, and used to making constant micro adjustments. It is like the way Janine Antoni (2003) claimed that she became a better tight rope walker when she became more comfortable with being unbalanced. In an episode of *Art 21* (2003), Antoni was talking about her performance piece, *Touch* (2002), where she set up a tight rope along a beach near her childhood home so when she walks along the wire it looks as if she is walking on the horizon (see image), and explained that after hours of practice she thought, “I’m now getting my balance” (46:18) but then amends that by saying, “I started to notice that it wasn’t that I was getting more balanced but that I was getting more comfortable with being out of balance” (46: 25). That statement has stuck with me over the years. We might think that being a good tight rope walker is about being balanced but Antoni’s comment suggests being good at tight rope walking is more about accepting that you will inevitably be out of balance so you don’t panic and over correct but instead can make slight adjustments. By recognizing that teaching is a wicked space and using vocabulary, metaphors, and models that reveal this complexity, we can become okay with indeterminacy, being unbalanced, and the unending dynamic nature of teaching. It’s like finding our balance by embracing imbalance. This is what I meant by wanting to learn how to “lie with the syllabus.” It is a desire to see education for what it is, a complex, dynamic, relational, and tensional thing. As Meadows (2008) said, “we can’t control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!” (p. 170). When I can see teaching for what it really is, I become more comfortable with the idea that being a teacher is to accept that we are in a never-ending entanglement, a relational



dance with our students, administration, parents, ourselves, and all the other tensions at play in education.

Thinking of teaching as a relational dance reminds me of something Amelia Kraehe and Tyson Lewis (2018) said in their essay on “Flashpoints,” they argue “when one touches something, one is simultaneously touched by it” (p. 5). I was struck by the way that reciprocal relationships enable a certain kind of seeing, a way to understand one-self in relation to the world around them. In Kish’s (2015) TED talk where he speaks about “flash sonar,” he says that for most people, going blind is an incomprehensible terror “thought to epitomize ignorance and unawareness, helpless exposure to the ravages of the dark unknown” (00:57). He later explains that flash sonar is how he learned to see through his blindness and navigate his journey through the “dark unknowns” of his challenges (03:28). While I am sighted, I relate to Kish’s experience on a more metaphoric level as I try to navigate the world, the unknown, and trying to locate myself within it. Maybe the true sense of pedagogy and learning is to understand the relationship that is inherent. It takes two. It takes the teacher and the learner, and those roles switch back and forth, giving and taking. We come to understand the world around us by putting out metaphoric soundwaves, which return and provide the information to assess space, shape, and proximity. It is a relational act that helps us understand where we are in relation to the world around us.

The best way I can think of describing this new posture for teaching is to describe it as being “Awake Forever in a Sweet Unrest,” which I borrow from the title of Anne Thulson’s (2022) keynote presentation that she gave at a conference for preservice art educators at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. For weeks prior to the conference and for months afterward there were flyers posted around the art buildings, including a bulletin board in the stairwell that leads to the graduate office where I have a desk. For almost a year I walked by that

poster every day and I would read that title, “Awake Forever in a Sweet Unrest.” The more I have reflected on it, the more I think that it is one of the best metaphors for what teaching is like. The word *unrest* connotes an unease, disturbance, or agitation but the addition of *sweet* suggests this continual movement, searching, perplexities, or entanglement is not a bad thing but something that is desirable, rewarding, something to savor. The “awake forever” portion suggests being fully conscious, alert, and aware of one’s situation or context and knowingly accepting that teaching is something that is never ending, durational, on-going, but that is okay because the entanglement and grappling with what it means to be a teacher is a sweet thing.

For so long my problem has been that my schema or mental models were more kind in nature, which inherently means they were not well suited for the complexity or wickedness of teaching. When I tried the posture of being “awake forever in a sweet unrest,” I let out a huge sigh of relief because I finally found a posture that seemed tailored to me and was perfectly suited for my context.

### ***The Challenge of this Posture***

Despite these realizations and my desire to take this new posture, it is not easy to be “awake forever in a sweet unrest.” It takes stamina and hard work to continually dance and indwell among the numerous tensions that exist in education. Starr (2019) acknowledges this point in the following statement, “To realize and bring into being what matters most to you, in alignment with your deepest values, requires rigorous self-awareness and ongoing self-development and cultivation” (p. 48). Maintaining or creating this sort of awareness and fully engaged posture is further complicated by the fact our nature is to slide back into the ready-at-hand, subconscious, or automatic way of being. Our body has a dual system of being for a reason. It takes a lot of energy and mental focus to be fully aware and we need times of rest, just

as we cannot stay awake all day, we need to sleep to be healthy. The daily demands of teaching can also be so demanding at times that all we can do in those moments is survive. However, it feels too dangerous to just leave something as significant as my teacher posture up to chance or subconscious learning. I want to know what I am doing, to be fully aware, fully responsible, and carefully attune my posture to the values and beliefs I hold most dear.

Taking this new posture is further complicated by the fact that education is inundated with “kind” or linear conventions of teaching, which can make it hard to take any other posture. In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig (1974) contends,

If a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys a government but the systemic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves...there's so much talk about the system and so little understood” (p. 98).

Even though we might have experienced a paradigm shift, we end up falling back into old patterns because the systems, forms, and language we use reflect the old value system. In other words, “We become what we practice and we’re always practicing something” (Starr, 2019, p. 52). Practicing can happen in a subconscious or conscious way. Again, this is why the power of the syllabus as a genre cannot be overlooked.

According to Starr (2019), the goal of somatics is to become aware of one’s somatic shape and through deliberate and self-reflective practices, attune that shape to the values we hold most dear, but this process of change can be slow. Neuroscientists claim that it takes around 300 repetitions for a physical movement (like serving a tennis ball) to establish muscle memory, but for that movement to become second nature, it takes 3000 repetitions (Starr, 2019). If it takes this

long for a physical movement to become second nature, how long will it take for something as complex as teacher posture? Starr (2019) answers this by saying, “With all due respect to those amazing athletes, I’d argue that the competencies (or capacities) we want to embody in our lives, in our leadership, teaching, and art-making, are far more complex, and require even more repetitions” (p. 54). What this means is teacher posture is not something that we decide once, but it is something that we must practice thousands of times, repetition after repetition.

### **The Syllabus as Anchor**

I know how easy it is to be lulled into a state of inattention or to live life in a mechanical way. Even the new will become familiar, comfortable, and mundane at some point. It is then easy to overlook or forget one’s posture without something to constantly remind us to hold ourselves in a certain way. The syllabus can be many things, but in an attempt to reclaim it and make it work for me, I contend that the syllabus could also be the anchor, a site of friction, or a touchpoint that holds me or reminds me that education is like a dance or being “awake forever in a sweet unrest,” something that is dynamic, complex, and relational.

Friction can sometimes be a bad thing, but friction can also be good. Friction disrupts our automatic nature and makes us pay attention. It can keep something from sliding to our subconscious realm or to the ready-at-hand mode. For example, if you press your thumb and forefinger together, you can sense the difference initially, but after a while it is difficult to sense the difference, but if you rub your thumb and forefinger together, the friction extends that time and makes it possible to sense the touch. This extension of awareness is what I am seeking because it allows me to revisit the values and ideas I have regarding teaching and carefully attune my posture to what the context calls for.

It may sound odd for me to be advocating for the syllabus as an anchor because anchors are things that bind, hold tight, and secure things in one spot, which may seem counterintuitive to the belief I have that a teacher needs to be adaptable and embrace the diverse and multidimensionality of education. You may also be wondering, doesn't the syllabus as contract metaphor, which I have criticized, have the same intent? I am not against being bound or held to something, but perhaps I simply prefer words like promise, covenant, or vow, over contract.

Rocha (2020) shares a similar view,

The word 'covenant' seems a bit different to me from the word 'contract.' The latter seems a bit stiff and legalistic. The former seems to convey something more relational and even sacred, which I prefer. A contract is made with a signature-promise, a covenant is made with a vow-promise. Maybe a signature is a vow of sorts, but I am not sure that they can be conflated entirely. They both do convey a sense of obligation though (p. 137-138).

Likewise, I feel a sense of obligation and accountability in what I say and do as a teacher. The syllabus can become the medium that binds me to my beliefs about education being something like an enduring entanglement or relational dance. Jorge Lucero captures in a recommendation letter that was part of a dissertation research grant proposal I submitted, many of the thoughts I am trying to hold on to and not forget:

Teachers think through—almost rehearse their courses—through the syllabus. The syllabus is a sketch, an exercise, a maquette, if you will, that holds the seedlings of the next part, but frequently it is left unexamined and untouched once it is printed or uploaded to the course site. Kaleb wants to constantly retouch it, always be reworking it since—in all its ways—it is not merely a contract between students and teachers, but

rather a means of communication akin to an extended hand inviting another to dance. At that point, the relational exchange between one and another (e.g. a teacher and their students) must be reciprocal, otherwise both will stumble. In its essence, Kaleb aims to reintroduce reciprocity in the syllabus as communicative tool and creative material (J. Lucero, personal communication, November 4, 2022).

In addition to holding on to the idea of teaching being a horizontal or relational exchange akin to a dance, I want to be reminded of what Aoki (1986/2004) said regarding the tensionality that is central to the concept of indwelling:

This tensionality calls on us as pedagogues to make time for meaningful striving and struggling, time for letting things be, time for question, time for singing, time for crying, time for anger, time for praying, and hoping. Within this tensionality, guided by a sense of pedagogic good, we are called on as teachers to be alert to the possibilities of our pedagogic touch, pedagogic tact, pedagogic attunement—those subtle features about being teachers that we know, but are not yet in our lexicon, for we have tended to be seduced by the seemingly lofty and prosaic talk in the language of conceptual abstractions (p. 164).

Aoki's thoughts remind me that valuing any one thing, whether that is the planned-curriculum, the lived-curriculum, or a student-centered curriculum will lead to imbalance. I used to dread writing a syllabus but now I see it as an opportunity to indwell between the many tensions that are at play in education. Every time I write a syllabus, I get the chance to reconsider my teacher beliefs and the impact I make through my actions, thoughts, and words. I get a chance to carefully rehearse who I am as a teacher and see if how I am posing myself is attuned to my core values and beliefs. Whenever I make or think about a syllabus now, I am afforded the space to

reclaim teaching as something that is complex, nuanced, dynamic, highly contextual, relational, and in short, one of the most human acts that we do.

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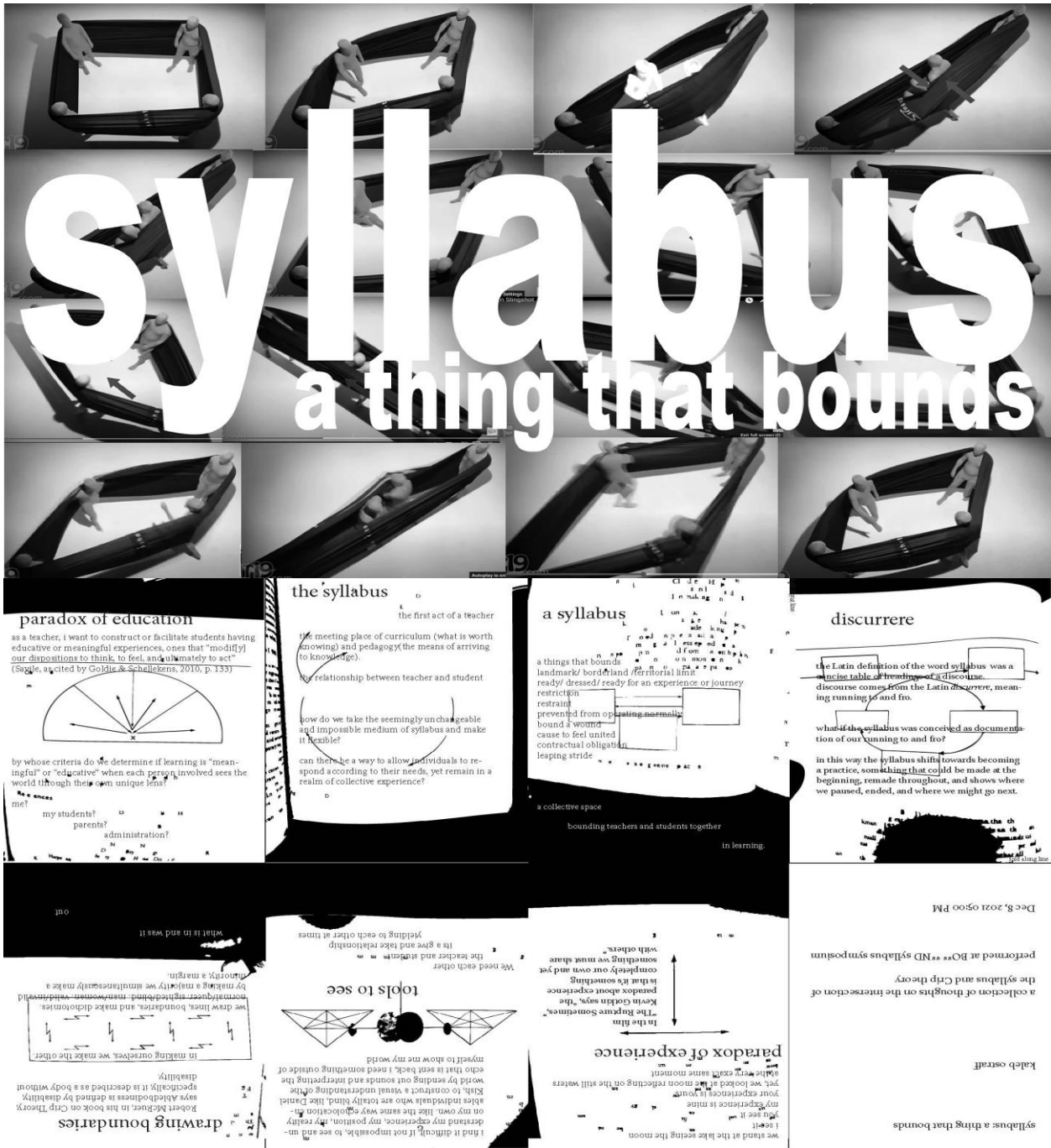
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# Appendix A: Syllabus: A Thing that Bounds

The front and back of the syllabus handout that accompanied the performance.



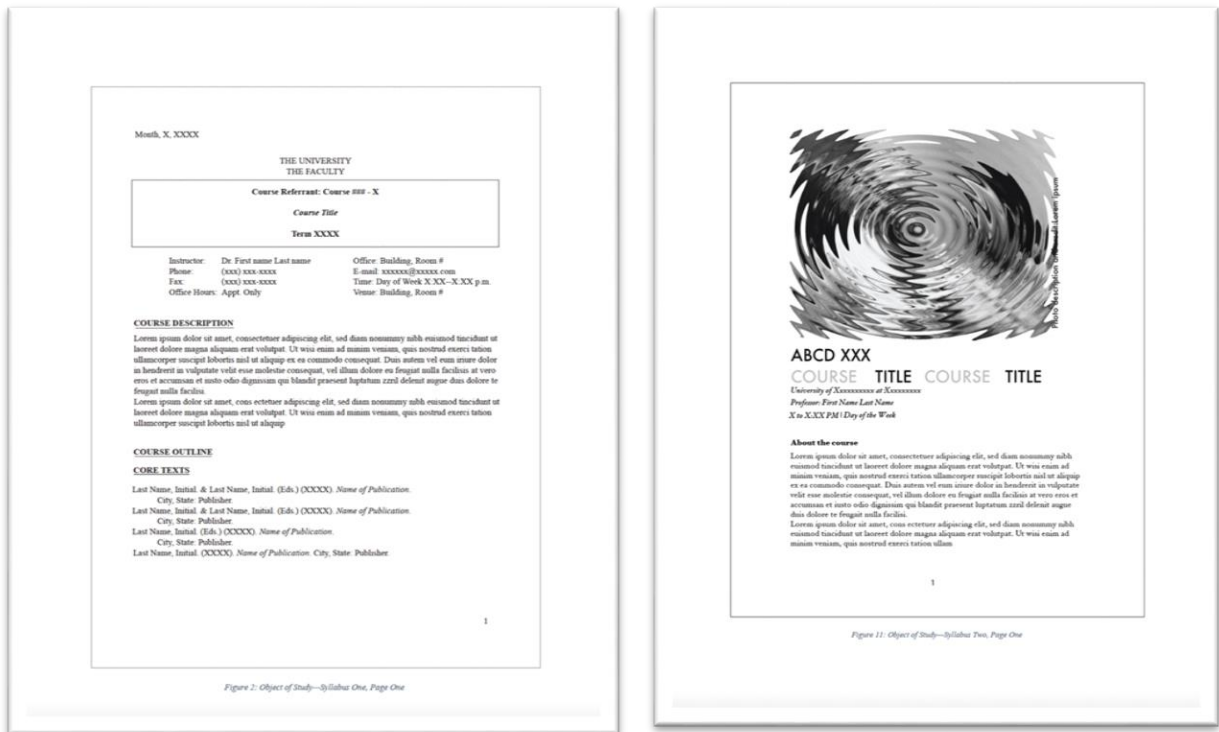
## Appendix B: Syllabus Form Inquiry

The following is the comprehensive version of the inquiry I made into the syllabus form.

To begin, I want to share a few foundational ideas that I took from Angela Baldus (2019), a friend of mine, who wrote an amazing essay about the syllabus, in which she examines the aesthetics of the syllabus form. As part of her inquiry, Angela took two syllabi from two graduate courses and stripped them of their content, replacing the text with filler text. What is left behind are template-looking syllabi (see Figure 60). Without the content, the aesthetics of the form, the “size, paper, color, font, arrangement of texts (possibly including words, images, sounds), length, order, texture, smell, shape, and anything else which may constitute the form” (Baldus, 2019, p. 5), become more prominent and the objects of study.

Figure 60

Baldus' objects of study, 2019



Angela then uses a methodical approach to describe each syllabus, describing the form and its minute details like where the page number is located, and which words are bolded and so on. While comparing the two stripped-bare syllabi, Angela clearly points out that the content matters. One cannot fully understand what the course will be like or answer any of the who, what, where, or why sort of questions about a course. However, the stripped syllabi's aesthetics of the form still have the capacity to be instructive and communicate a great deal about the professor, their philosophical approaches to education, what the course might be like, and how a student should read the syllabus.

At one point in the essay, Angela asks, "How do syllabi invite and suggest different ways to read, hear, see, feel them?" (p. 3). I was particularly interested in this question because it poses the possibility that syllabi are active agents or material that invite a certain way of reading and responding to the syllabus. In her words, "Most syllabi, through their course outlines, dates, times, and assignments, map a course of study and suggest we follow the course in a particular way" (p. 4). As such, Angela contends that the following beliefs about syllabi can be assumed:

1. Syllabi are informative
2. Sometimes Syllabi are informal, but most are formal
3. There are different ways to infer and interpret how syllabi should be read
4. Syllabi often gesture to how they should be read. (p. 5).

Angela proposed that the form of the syllabus is more than just a physical attribute, but is an active mechanism that gestures towards how to read it and the course of action or posture we should take in response to it. Angela's gesture was similar to Patton's (2016) course plan for his typology course in which he proposed that students could learn about the essence of an object by



stripping away the difference, only in this case, the stripping away of the content, reveals the form or conventions of syllabi.

Inspired by Angela, I began looking closer at the syllabus and some of the aspects that seem conventional like the title at the top, the distinct layout or structural elements like indented paragraphs, lists, bullets, the language that is used like the use of future tense verbs (“we will do this,” or “Students will learn...”), or the presence of a reading list. As I looked at these parts of the syllabus, I thought about them as active agents or mechanisms that were embedded with certain coherences or logic that were working to accomplish some means or another. As such, these rather mundane things inherently shape the way the syllabus functions in relation to the three points I shared in the previous section (framing or distinguishing (curriculum), the communicative part (pedagogy), and the relational/ trust part). Part of this inquiry also considered how these components could be misused or altered so they would function differently. I present here some of the thoughts that arose through this inquiry.

### **The Formal Components**

Let’s begin at the top with the title. Without fail, almost all of the syllabi I have come across have a title at the top of the document. This title corresponds with the specific course being taught and often highlights the theme or topic of the course, and occasionally the school name or logo, but they all have a title that stands out because it is larger, bolded, or made to stand out in some manner or another. Why though? Where does this convention come from? Perhaps having a title at the top of a syllabus is just logical, a no-brainer, or common sense, but as Herbert Simon (1957) argues through his theory about bounded rationality, people make rational decisions within the context and information they have available, meaning the use of a title is not random or meaningless. In fact, there is a good chance this practice can be traced back

to the first iteration of the syllabus when it was considered a title slip for a scroll. In this way, it might even be central to the functioning of the syllabus. The same goes for the structural forms like lists, bullet points, indented paragraphs, and underlined or bolded sections that might be easy to overlook and write off as something common to the syllabus, but these forms seem to be inherited from the syllabus as a table of contents. Even the inclusion of a reading list in a syllabus has a history and cannot be overlooked if we want to fully understand the work that a syllabus is doing. Let's take a quick look at the reading list to illustrate this point.

Making a reading list may seem to be a rather innocuous act that communicates what a student will read for a course or topic. However, this view might not fully acknowledge the power involved in the making of a reading list. For example, one of the earliest examples of a reading list in connection to syllabi comes from Callimachus, who was an important intellectual of his time (280-240 BCE) and a librarian at the library at Alexandria. According to Gregor Weber (2011), a historian of classical antiquity, the library at Alexandria during this time had around two hundred thousand papyrus scrolls in its collection. Callimachus was given the challenge of creating a comprehensive catalog of the collection. Callimachus' subsequent catalog, which was known as *Πίνακες* ("Tables"), provided author's names and biographies for a limited selection of some of the more preeminent authors in the library's collection (Bond, 2016). In addition to this catalog, Callimachus also began putting together lists about important writers in every branch of learning or a proto-reading list, which Sarah Bond (2016), another ancient historian, describes as an "anthology or greatest hits album" (para. 8). Callimachus had power in determining which books out of the thousands would be important enough to catalog and add to his lists or anthologies. We are not told how or why Callimachus chose what he did, but it likely reflected his own bias and personal values. The reading list inherently includes some

author's works and excludes others. This is the power of making a reading list; determining which authors, ideas, and stories students will engage with via reading and discussion. By placing a text on a reading list, we indicate its value and worth and give place to that author's ideas and narratives. As a consequence, those ideas and texts are the things we carry on because they were given a place at the table, making it so we become familiar and aware with them. This is also how we end up with a limited canon of texts that we continually rely on.

I define "texts" liberally to extend beyond just books, essays, or articles to include art pieces, video, sounds, or anything that is meant to introduce ideas to be engaged with in a class. The art educator, Anne Thulson (2021) has written about the canon in art education and notes that despite each teacher being unique and working in varied circumstances, the artists that we teach about are remarkably similar. Thulson says this canon typically includes artists like Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Jacob Lawrence, Georgia O'Keefe, and Pablo Picasso, to name a few. This limited list shows a small sliver of artists that traditionally come from Europe or North America and are mostly men. It is not just our artists canon that is very limited in its scope, but in the written texts we assign as well. The Open Syllabus, a non-profit archive of syllabi collected from around the globe, has a feature that shows a plot of the most assigned texts, which totals 1,138, 841 different texts that were pulled from a database of 7, 292, 573 course syllabi. There is not a section for art education courses, but there is a category for art. In this category, the Open Syllabus indicates that *A World of Art*, by Henry Sayre showed up in 1,884 different syllabi, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, by Fred Kleiner appeared in 1,759 art syllabi, John Berger's text, *Ways of Seeing*, was used 1,231 times, and *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood showed up 1,017 times. These examples demonstrate that out of all the possible texts on art, these books are being assigned over and over

again, at the exclusion of other authors or artists. This may present an inaccurate view of art that is dominated by Western culture and White-male artists, even though there is a much more diverse narrative of art that exists in the world. These examples further illustrate the fact that what a teacher chooses to include in a reading list is not of in consequence.

### *An Inherent Challenge*

When I consider the various parts of a syllabus and their purpose, I see an inherent challenge behind many of these formal components. Just as the title tags on scrolls identified each scroll and the knowledge contained within, we need a way to distinguish the different kinds of knowledge or learning experiences from each other. Instead of scrolls that need to be distinguished from each other, teachers are now working with a vast array of knowledge that needs to be labeled and distinguished. At a university for example, there are many different disciplines, with classes that cover a wide range of topics; without a way to organize this information, it would be difficult to distinguish one class from another. Titling courses and their syllabi act like the title slip indicating the knowledge that will be covered in that course. When the syllabus was a list of topics for a lecture, or simply just a list of topics for a given course of study, it is easy to see how it helped people to know what would be discussed. The various posters often hung on campus bulletin boards to advertise courses are probably very similar. Students can use these titles and accompanying short descriptions to form an idea of what knowledge the course cover. However, there is more to determining what a learning situation will be like than just answering what will be covered. There are questions about who, how, when, and why (the pedagogical and relational parts of the syllabus) that may be hinted at or implied in these more bare-bones syllabi, but without further information, it can be hard to fully know beforehand. Thus, the syllabus expanded to include more information on the how, why,

when, and who of a course in order to be more communicative about what each course would entail.

The task of titling is really a task of defining the boundary of a course, discipline, or field. Ramia Mazé (2009), in an interview about critical design, wrote, “At least in part, building a discipline is about specifying the knowledge, skills, capabilities, ideas, and interests in relation to that of other disciplines” (p. 391). So, in order for a discipline to be a discipline, it uses labels to distinguish or define itself from others—“We are this, not this.” In their philosophical examination of teaching, Biesta and Stengel (2016) reiterate this point by claiming that teachers develop curriculum as a way to focus students' attention, enabling them to “focus on something rather than on anything or everything” (p. 35). This seems to be a necessity that comes from the sheer number of possibilities. The American psychologist, Barry Schwartz, gave a TED talk back in 2005, where he talked about the “paradox of choice,” which Schwartz explains comes from the Western industrial societies’ belief in freedom of choice. These societies, according to Schwartz, wanted to maximize freedom by maximizing choice. Schwartz argues we can see this in the number of products one can choose from at a grocery store, the wide arrange of denim pants that are available today, or the many phone options available to consumers. Although, all of this choice may present greater freedom, Schwartz argues it can also paralyze people through choice overload, meaning that too much choice can be a bad thing. There needs to be a balance, where there is some choice, but not too much. In terms of education, teachers cannot talk about everything, so they need to draw a line, a boundary, a demarcation of what they will look at as a way to limit some possibilities.

### ***Framing***

Another way we might describe this practice is as a “framing device,” which provides a border or construct to identify something or make possible a certain action or thought. A doorway has a frame that defines the space cut into the wall to allow one to pass through. A window, similarly, is a frame that allows for light to pass between two spaces, allowing us to see out or in. Our logic, system of values, or perceptions provides the structure or frame for certain mindsets or views of the world. A viewfinder in a camera describes the “frame” or what will constitute the composition of the photograph; it frames a way of seeing. Angela Baldus’ four assumptions about syllabi that I shared earlier are frames or lenses to look at the syllabus in a certain way. Caleb Bissinger (2018), an art historian, defines a frame as “a boundary, a border, a margin; it is the picture’s remarkable and inconspicuous terminus...it is the apparatus that houses the painting and “Says, look over here” (para. 2). He goes on to say, “I’d say to frame something, in both the literal and figurative sense, is to define it as an object; it may be limited or incomplete, but it stands on its own; it has a purpose” (para 3). Using a frame as a way to define an object seems important in understanding the world. The world is made up of many things, ideas, and people and we make meaning of all of this by understanding how they relate to each other and how they are different. Maybe this is what Phil Patton (2016) meant when he talked about the way philosophers looked for insight by analyzing what is the same and what is different in classes of objects. We try to understand the world by seeing differences and distinguishing one thing from another. I look like that person. I don’t look like that person. That thing is dangerous, this thing is safe. Framing is a structure; it protects, makes space, and helps create meaning by making distinctions.

Finding the difference between things and making distinctions is a core human act. In the article, “The Evolution of School Subjects” (1928), Alfred Crabb said, “Man is the only living

creature consciously devoted to organization” (p. 236) and has been making systems of organization as a way of meaning-making since the beginning of human existence. Crabb goes on to provide a variety of examples of how schools have compartmentalized knowledge into box subjects. For example, in 300 B.C., the University at Alexandria taught subjects that were split into categories like grammar, rhetoric, poetry, philosophy, medicine, music, and mathematics. Crabb also showed the earliest Harvard schedule (taken from Meriwether’s “Our Colonial Curriculum”), which shows a list of seemingly separate topics that students would study over a three-year duration. As these examples illustrate, the world of academia, and the world at large, often have already drawn the lines or boundaries for each discipline, college, subject, or course.

However, as Gregory Bateson (2011) argues, the world is not fragmented into these distinct boxes of knowledge where there are distinctions between psychology, art, anthropology, etc., which he argues the world of academia seems to suggest by making distinct disciplines and colleges. Bateson is not arguing that there is not some distinction between things or knowledge, but takes issue with the way that academia becomes locked into one disciplinary approach or way of thinking about the world. The problem then is that we have designated domains or disciplines that are assigned to deal with certain knowledge in the world. If you want to talk about the brain, go to psychology or neurology. If want to talk about money, go to business. Law to law. Writing to English. Art to art. However, the world outside of the learning institutions doesn’t fit neatly into those boxes and often crosses the boundaries that have been established. The crux is it is not feasible to teach everything all at once (although, when I am feeling audacious, I want to try), meaning a tool that frames or limits what can be talked about is of some necessity; however, how we frame or draw those boundaries is important. The reality is that there is not enough space in museums, classroom curricula, or a discipline’s scope to show,

talk about, or give space to everything that could be important or valuable; yet we have to be careful about the distinctions or boundaries that we make to limit and focus our curriculum or discipline, and avoid turning a boundary into a separation that suggests that anything outside is unconnected or less valuable. The same limitations extend to how we teach. We cannot use every method or practice available. We are limited by circumstances like our classrooms, budgets, and class sizes, but the methods and postures we use shape the learning experiences of our students.

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If we return to the historical example of labeling scrolls, similar issues are present. For the system to be effective, it relies on each label accurately describing the contents of the scroll or box and the form of communication or language used to be legible between the maker (writer) of the label and whoever would be searching (reading) the labels later on. One of the main problems that existed with this system was the inconsistency of the information on the title slip. Usually, the title slips on scrolls contained just the author's name and the title of the work (Mitchell, 2007), but other times, there was no title, but instead an excerpt of the opening words of the text. There was also the problem that Bond (2016) notes, where some texts early on did not have just one title, but were referred to in a variety of ways depending on the person, for example, Plato's *Phaedo*, was also known as *On the Soul*. These discrepancies made it difficult to have consistency and lead to confusion over which work was contained in the scroll.

Similarly, the tag on the label may, intentionally or unintentionally, be mislabeled and one would have to unroll the text and read it to verify its accuracy. William Johnson (2010) recounts a story about Galen, the physician, writer, and philosopher. Galen went to a bookseller's shop in Rome and observed someone trying to buy a book that was supposedly one of his works. The label on the book roll said it was Galen's work; however, the man examining it declared



after reading the text that it was not Galen's work and ripped off the tag label. Apparently, there was a practice of publishing texts under someone else's name and some booksellers mislabeled texts to charge more.

In the case of the clay tags describing the contents of a box, what happens if a tablet is removed from the box and put somewhere else? The label would no longer be accurate. What happens if the label writer forgets the meaning of what they wrote? (Have you ever written a note where you thought you would remember this later, but when you go back you lost the train of thought you had earlier? Or you scrawled it so messily it is indecipherable?). Maybe the wording used could be interpreted differently, leading to miscommunication. There wasn't much said about who makes the labels. Is it a specialist, someone with authority, or just anyone as long as they know what is inside? While it was not said directly, the boxes could have been organized and labeled by themes, allowing for new tablets to be stored in boxes of other tablets that were thematically similar. But what happens then if you have a tablet that could fit into two different distinct groupings? Where does it belong? Out of necessity for the system to function well, there would have to be periodic assessments to ensure the contents of boxes and labels matched, or it would not take long to lose trust in the system if you continually cannot find what you are looking for.

There is also a potential that the intent or desired behavior of the system could be slightly modified. Many times, we assume that labeling and organization systems are meant to be about finding the thing you are looking for only. However, there might be other possibilities that emerge outside of the desired outcome. For example, we might find something as a surprise that we stumbled on while looking for something else. Similar to going to a library for a specific book and ending up finding other books nearby that seem relatable. In fact, that is probably one

reason that libraries are categorized thematically. Even a non-system of organization is a system that will generate a certain behavior. For example, a non-organized book collection necessitates you having to search the whole collection for the thing you want, but through the searching, you might be reminded of the books that you had forgotten about and maybe even make a new connection through the search. Even a flawed system will still produce a behavior, despite it failing the intended goal, and sometimes, those behaviors, while not planned for, might be valuable and even desirable.

So, what is the significance of all of this? Are these structural and format conventions important, or is this history of evolution of the formal parts of the syllabus merely a way to organize information? For me, the formal structure and systems of organization that can be seen in these various examples of syllabi, which began with the table of contents, are significant to pay attention to because they are not neutral, but fulfill a purpose like organizing knowledge in logical ways or summarizing information to make the tasks of readers/speakers/teachers/students easier or more efficient. Syllabus designers did this by using visual representations, structural organization methods, lettering, tabs, page numbers, etc., to show the conceptual relationship between things. These additions help readers navigate a text more easily or recognize how topics in the course relate to each other. On the other hand, these tools shape the experience of those using them and have a logic built into them that can influence the way they think. This is not necessarily bad, but something that should be known and accounted for.

For example, while reading a syllabus for one of my art education courses, I read a statement in the syllabus that stood out to me: “Don’t be fooled by the fact that you are holding something that looks and feels like a syllabus in your hand. We will be making this course up as we go along” (Travis, 2020, p. 1). I was intrigued by this statement because my professor, Sarah

Travis, was telling me that the thing I was holding could easily be identified by its recognizable form as a syllabus, while also saying, “Even though this looks like a conventional syllabus and might imply that I, as the professor, am in charge, I am actually asking you to make this course with me.” Again, it felt like a barrier was broken down in that moment by her acknowledging that syllabi and their conventions also have a set of typical behaviors or roles for students and teachers.

Soon after this experience, in a meeting with my dissertation advisor Jorge Lucero, I read him this statement and pointed out the way it was referencing the form and the conditioned postures we take when we think of the typical syllabus. What followed was a funny moment when Jorge asked where I was reading that line from, because those words were actually his words. Jorge had taught the course prior to Sarah Travis and had offered his old syllabi as a starting point. Sarah later explained to me that she liked that portion, so she kept in her syllabus, thus making it her own thought. While this story is a tangential, I use it to point out that the ways we design a syllabus with a distinctive form are how we recognize it as a distinct genre of writing, which then leads to a set of appropriate behaviors or postures being taken.

I return to Angela Baldus’ formal study of the syllabus, in the stripping of the content, she revealed how the formal elements, the font, use of images, etc., can be more than a mere physical attribute, it can be an active mechanism that gestures towards how to read, interpret, and respond to the material. Likewise, the author, William Slights (2001) believes that something as simple as the choice to leave blank space in the margin of a text is a way of managing readers. For example, Slights, argues that in leaving room in the margin of Bibles, publishers “encourage the reader to create his or her own constellations of spiritual significance” (p. 2). These forms and elements in the syllabus are not meaningless, but are in fact significant. In her article, Baldus

speaks about a syllabus she received when taking a course from my advisor, Jorge Lucero, that, through its form, presents itself and the class as being not a class, but as an artwork. This then provokes us to wonder how seeing a class or syllabus as an artwork changes the way we approach that learning experience.

### **The Significance**

Whenever we create a title that designates one thing from another or take one teaching posture over another, we limit, frame, or make possible certain kinds of experiences that will determine which knowledge will be focused on. We make boundaries, which may be necessary, but that inherently exclude something in order to highlight something else. In the *Power of Maps* (1992), Denis Wood makes a similar statement about maps not being able to show everything, so the cartographer must be selective in presenting a selection from the “vast storehouse of knowledge in the form of presences or absences” (p.1.). This unavoidable necessity means that “every map shows *this*...but not *that*, and every map shows what it shows *this way*...but not *the other*” (p. 1.). In another text, *Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas*, Wood (2010) states, “We begin to see that [maps] are servants of *this* way of thinking as opposed to *that*, they’re involved in story-telling, they’re no compendia of facts...atlases have always been ordered to promote one reading at the expense of another” (pg. 10). The problem is not so much that a map, a frame, or a title distinguish one thing from another to limit what we focus on, but that we forget that we are looking at a limited view, an arbitrary boundary, or a partial view of reality. Bissinger (2018) made a similar point when he remarked that frames are something that “we fail to notice” they are “there but not there” (para. 2). Similarly, Janet Marstine (2005) in her text on new museum theory and practice, argues that administrative processes like museum registration and cataloging practices, which might be overlooked as being significant things to pay attention to,

ought to be seen as being just as important as the curation and design of an exhibition, because they are framing devices that control the viewing process and suggest a certain narrative which is often viewed as being an “authentic” mirror of the world, factual, neutral, or free of subjectivity, and go unquestioned. Going further, Marstine states,

Frames not only set boundaries; they provide an ideologically based narrative context that colors our understanding of what’s included. In fact, rather than isolating a work from the wider world, framing links the two. Architectural features, lighting design, audio-tour headsets, the museum café, and the larger museum itself are all framing devices (p. 4).

Essentially, Marstine is declaring the museum as “an active player in the making of meaning” (p. 5) and calls for greater attention to be given to what views, stories, or ideologies are being presented explicitly and implicitly in museums via framing devices.

Marstine’s call for more criticality of our practices, especially those that seem mundane or innocuous, is one that I have heard repeatedly. As I shared in the introduction, scholars like Harris (2007), and Schwartz and Cook (2002) have advocated for a more careful consideration of things like our built environment, archives, and museums, because these cultural spaces form ideas about race, identity, belonging, exclusion, and power, they control how knowledge is preserved and shared. Sharon Macdonald (2011), a British anthropologist and museologist, similarly argues that museums often, intentionally or unintentionally, produce inequalities of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class by controlling what is excluded or included in “the canon,” “the norm,” “the objective,” or “the notable” (p. 3). For these reasons, I argue that how we frame knowledge matters.

While some museums have utilized framing as a tool to control and perpetuate inequality, Allen, et al., (2013) have used the concept of framing as way for leaders to shift decision-making

power to others by providing context, clarifying the essential issues, and providing needed information so others can be empowered to share their own informed ideas or solutions. The leader is leveraging their knowledge and expertise to enable others to be included in the process, not to further their own perspective. In a similar way, Lev Vygotsky (1978), the renowned psychologist, envisioned the role of a teacher to be someone who uses their knowledge to help less experienced students achieve beyond their ability by scaffolding their learning. In both of these examples, the key is for those with experience and expert knowledge to remember that even though others may have less experience, it does not mean those individuals do not have valuable insights to share or are incapable of engaging in decision making.

The reality is that there is not enough space in museums, classroom curricula, or a discipline's scope to show, talk about, or give space to everything that could be important or valuable; yet we have to be careful about the distinctions or boundaries that we make to limit and focus our curriculum or discipline turning into a boundary of separation that suggests that anything outside is unconnected or less valuable. It is necessary to make distinctions, create frames, and determine what a course will focus on or not. But in so doing, we also need to acknowledge that each title or frame is one way of doing it that will serve a certain purpose or perspective and that it is inevitable that we might bring in our own biases, cultural views, and experiences that need to be acknowledged.

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When talking about placing labels or distinctions on knowledge in education, the terms “informal” and “formal” are important labels to understand. Formal learning is often considered to be the learning that happens in schools and informal learning is the learning that happens outside of these dedicated spaces (Jeffs & Smith, 1997, 2005, 2011). Michael Eraut (2000),

professor of education at the University of Sussex in England, describes formal learning as the learning that happens when there is a prescribed learning framework, organized learning event, designated teacher, awards or qualifications or credit given, and external specifications regarding outcomes. These views are further supported by Ruth Amos and Michael Reiss (2012), who argue formal education is structured, compulsory, and teacher-led. In comparison, informal learning is described as being spontaneous, unregulated, incidental, unpredictable, and can be a much slower, lifelong type of learning that is built from an aggregate of many experiences, making it difficult to predict or control the outcomes (Dewey, 1916/2009; Sanders, 2007; Jeffs & Smith, 1997, 2005, 2011). John Dewey (1916/2009), prominent educational reformer, furthers the dichotomy between informal and formal learning by stating that informal learning is incidental and lacks ceremony, whereas formal learning is deliberate and controlled. Philip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed (1974), while writing about non-formal education take a similar view and describe informal education as being, “unorganized, unsystematic, and even unintentional at times, yet accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning—including that of a highly ‘schooled’ person” (p. 8). In short, formal learning is characterized by being structured, deliberate, systematic, and predictable, whereas informal learning is unpredictable, unregulated, and spontaneous.

While informal and formal learning may simply indicate where learning happens, in schools or outside of them, or a general description of the type of learning (open vs closed), they can also be used to validate or devalue certain types of learning. For example, indigenous ways of knowing and learning seem to always be excluded from formal learning spaces (Kimmerer, 2015), as well as other minority groups or the knowledge of women. James Haywood Holling (2020), then President-Elect of the National Art Education Association’s Equity, Diversity, &

Inclusion Commission, wrote a letter in which he points out the ways that schools are a tool for those with power to perpetuate inequalities of minorities and maintain power for themselves. Kalin (2012) further adds that dedicated institutions of learning are increasingly governed by authoritarian models of learning that focus on producing tangible results that adhere to the logic of economics and little else. Even the dictionary definition of formal alludes to the power of the word when it describes it as being official, traditional, and guided by rules (“formal”). When we label something formal or informal based on these logics, we are complicit in the systems that sort and categorize them, even if we are not fully aware.

What would happen if there was a world where the words informal and formal were erased from our vocabularies? When I imagine a world where the terms informal and formal are erased, I feel some apprehension at not having a way to distinguish between the learning that happens in schools from the learning that happens elsewhere. The terms informal and formal do more than denote the location of learning, they also create a dichotomy which values certain types of knowledge and learning over others. However, despite my initial apprehension, without the simple informal and formal labels, value may arise from requiring individuals to scrutinize each type of learning by looking closely at its inherent qualities, forms, and outcomes in contrast to other forms of learning. In essence, this hearkens back to one of the etymological origins of the word “formal,” which means “pertaining to the form or constitutive essence of a thing” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). In art, the focus on form is part of “the critical position” called formalism, which takes the view that the most important part of an art piece is its form “rather than its narrative content or its relationship to the visible world” (Tate, n.d.). As a result, the characteristics of the various types of learning can emerge and reveal how they uniquely access different types of knowledge through diverse ways of knowing.



When learning is assessed purely on its form, the terms informal and formal represent a spectrum of learning that takes on a more concrete form or a less concrete form. Informal learning is not seen as being inferior to formal learning. Similarly, Coombs and Ahmed (1974) illustrate how learning in an informal way often allows individuals to acquire important knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from daily life in all the spaces they occupy. I argue that we could substitute formal learning for informal in that sentence and it would still work, it merely comes down to which type of learning will result in the desired knowledge. Smith (1999, 2008) summarizes this well by stating, “The main problem with regard to theoretical development is that as soon as we begin to look at the characteristics of learning activities within ‘dedicated’ and non-dedicated learning environments, we find a striking mix of educational and learning processes in each” (pg. 125-126). Increasingly, the terms, *informal* and *formal*, are “slippery” terms (Buehler, 1981; Gilligan, 2016) that are difficult to assess their meaning, because as Illich (1971) points out, they have become so flexible that they cease to be useful or in this case difficult to distinguish from each other. Yet, they have a significant role in determining how we value and think of certain types of learning. Frank Coffield (2000), after 42 years of being involved in education, remarks that the label “informal learning” results in people considering it to be an “inferior form of learning whose main purpose is to act as the precursor of formal learning” (p. 8). Without those labels, the assessment of learning may simply be judged based on whether it can create a meaningful experience for the user that is “educative” (Dewey, 1916/2009) and whether it “modifies our dispositions to think, to feel, and ultimately to act” (Savile, as cited by Goldie & Schellekens, 2010, p. 133). This creative gesture and subsequent thoughts point to the need for a more careful use of the terms formal and informal in order to not

exclude and invalidate certain types of knowledge, but instead use those terms to more accurately describe the forms of learning.

With these thoughts in mind, I turn back to the title that is placed at the top of the syllabus. This simple gesture, or any other seemingly insignificant gesture like leaving blank space in the margin or the selection of pronouns we use, makes a mark that is significant. In the case of the title, it allows for each class to be distinguished from another. The syllabus becomes a way to define what knowledge will or will not pertain to a specific course. Its function is to focus the student and teacher's attention on the relevant knowledge that is needed to meet the institutional goals (training students for a profession, licensing, or mastery of a discipline). The syllabus is a tool to distinguish the formal (prescribed) curriculum, from the informal (unregulated) curriculum. While traditionally, the syllabus might be thought of as a boundary or box that sorts knowledge into categories that are relevant to the course and keeps the others out, there may be other ways of distinguishing knowledge and limiting our focus without being exclusionary or keeping certain knowledge out of education.