The Inclusive Syllabus Project

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Syllabi are central to the innerworkings of academic life at institutions of higher education. As material artefacts with social lives, they are boundary objects[1] that mediate diverse forms and expressions of power: institutional requirements, academic freedom, student experiences, and curricular norms (Star and Greisemer 1989; see also Fornaciari and Dean 2014).[2] Syllabi have plural and multiple identities; they are at once considered legal and contractual documents (Nilson 2010) that set the academic standards and expectations for the course; they are powerful epistemic documents that curate content representing whose knowledge counts, why, and how; and they are meant as guides that structure temporal, relational, and substantive engagement among instructors, students, and content over a discrete period of time. Syllabi, in short, can reinforce normative aspects of institutional knowledge-making. Syllabi also can be sites of transformative change that disrupt silences, invisibilities, and oppressions.

This short article details some of the considerations that informed the creation of an inclusive syllabus project that was conceived during the fall semester when I was a 2018 Purdue University Faculty Retention and Success through Intergroup Dialogue fellow. Curating resources already available on inclusive syllabi, the appended guide provides a summary outline of guidelines and resources for faculty crafting their syllabi. The guide is not meant to be an exhaustive list of resources. Instead it is organized topically and thematically to bring together already established resources to present instructors with pathways to integrate inclusive and justice-oriented principles into their pedagogy. The guide also draws attention to ways in which instructors may signal diverse forms of support through syllabi curation. Thus, in suggesting syllabi have plural and multiple identities, the guide moves away from simply envisioning syllabi as legal and contractual documents, and instead invites instructors to imagine the possibilities for

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[1] Star and Greisemer (1989: 393) explain boundary objects as "objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites."
[2] See Fornaciari and Lund Dean (2014) on their review of scholarly literature on the syllabus, which they place in four categories: syllabus as contract, as power, as communication or signaling device, and as collaboration.

syllabi to unsettle and create inclusive, anti-racist, and decolonial change within the classroom, the university, and beyond.

This project is grounded in the assumption that the way syllabi are curated are representative of particular pedagogical philosophies and practices that reflect broader processes of knowledge making.[3] Whereas some of the recent shifts in higher education have driven neoliberalisation of the academy and the production of performative knowledge economies (Olssen and Peters 2007), simultaneously, we have seen other shifts in pedagogical scholarship that seeks to challenge those very same extractive knowledge systems (Giroux 2003).[4] On the pedagogical front, scholarly interventions are taking place toward constructivist approaches in the classroom, inclusive pedagogies, decolonizing pedagogies, and anti-racist education, amongst others (see Table 1). For example, many universities of higher education are shifting from a model that considers students as passive learners and consumers to approaches that prioritize recognizing the multiple, embodied and intersectional identities of students while at the same time moving away from faculty "narrating" an educational experience to one where students interact with each other and instructors to jointly generate knowledge (Davidson 2016). Syllabi reflect these

Table 1
Progressive and Anti-Racist Pedagogy Approaches

Approach	Definition
Constructivist Pedagogy	Active learning, service learning and community engagement, the flipped classroom, and other similarly situated approaches align with this constructivist approach. In this sense, "the implications of constructivism for a learning environment include using curricula customized to the students' prior knowledge, the tailoring of teaching strategies to student backgrounds and responses, and employing open-ended questions that promote extensive dialogue among learners" (Rovai 2004:21).
Inclusive Pedagogies	Are grounded in disabilities studies, critical race studies, and gender and sexuality studies and are "grounded in wider concerns about facilitating social justice and bringing about equity in an educational sphere traditionally seen as hierarchical, elitist and the domain of white upper/middle-class men (Leathwood and Read 2009)" (Stentiford and Koutsouris 2020:2).[5]
Anti-Oppressive and Social Justice Education	"Brandes and Kelly (2004) give one of the most commonly understood meanings, stating that "anti-oppression education highlights diversity in schools and society and proposes ways of using the multiple perspectives brought forward by the diverse student population as an integral part of teaching" (p. 7). … Social justice and anti-oppressive education also means challenging domination, and understanding how schools play a role in perpetuating economic and cultural inequality through regular classroom discourse, student–student and student–teacher interactions, and through the curriculum—especially the ideas taught, what is held to constitute valid knowledge, and how that knowledge is disseminated and assessed in cross-cultural teaching (Aikenhead, 1997, 2001)." (Stavrou and Miller 2017:98).

[3] See Dweck's work on a psychological approach to this topic: Dweck, C. (2015). Carol Dweck revisits the growth mindset. *Education Week*, *35*(5), 20-24.
[4] Giroux (2003) details the ways in which neoliberal projects have not only supported institutional racism but fostered new racism, color-blindness practices, and what he calls neoliberalism racism.
[5] For a review of inclusive pedagogies see: Stentiford, L. and Koutsouris, G. (2020). What are inclusive pedagogies in higher education? A systematic scoping review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-17.

Decolonizing Pedagogies	"Decolonizing … then is a process of unpacking the keeper current in education: its powerful Eurocentric assumptions of education, its narratives of race and difference in curriculum and pedagogy, its establishing culturalism or cultural racism as a justification of the status quo, and the advocacy for Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate education topic (Battiste 2013:105). "Decolonizing education is a counter-hegemonic framework for contesting colonization, racialization, and forced assimilation strategies, and generates empowerment for Indigenous knowledge systems, health, and well-being through education (Battiste, 1986, 2011). Thus, decolonizing and anti-oppressive education mean much more than the common understanding of promoting cultural diversity and non-Western perspectives. It requires identifying and challenging the root causes of oppression, how inequality is reproduced in the classroom, and finding strategies to counter educational discourses that position Western knowledge as superior and other knowledge (such as Indigenous knowledge) as inferior" (Stavrou and Miller 2017:99).
Anti-Racist Pedagogies	"Antiracist Pedagogy is a paradigm located within Critical Theory utilized to explain and counteract the persistence and impact of racism using praxis as its focus to promote social justice for the creation of a democratic society in every respect" (Blakeney 2005:119). "Antiracist pedagogy represents a shift from traditional university teaching practices and as such involves a change in thinking that will necessarily be unsettling for some students, as it requires them to move beyond their comfortable, deeply rooted views of the world. Any transformation in thinking necessarily entails a risk as one tries out new approaches and tests new beliefs and frameworks of understanding." (Wagner 2005:263).

philosophies in a multitude of ways through their presentation of routine items such as course descriptions, objectives, resources and assignments as well as required items, such as attendance policies, academic integrity, accessibility and non-discrimination statements. Yet, as instructors embed university and unit requirements in their syllabi, these are inevitably in articulation with diverse pedagogical philosophies and practices. Below is a short list of some topics or areas that an instructor may consider when developing their syllabus:

- the politics of the institution's history and founding,
- statements and policies (the when, where, how and why they are presented),
- the design aesthetic and how it is responsive to differentially abled and positioned students,
- the rhetoric and categories used in the front and back matter,
- stated course objectives and modes of learning,
- the substantive content of the syllabus (what are the topics and units and what kinds of sources are considered credible, legitimate and authoritative),
- the descriptive representation of BIPOC[6], women, and knowledge-holders of diverse and intersectional positionalities (who is represented and why),
- how students interact with each other and the faculty member in the classroom space,
- types of assignments and their descriptions (e.g. collaborative, universal design approaches, Transparency in Learning and Teaching-TILT[7]), and

[6] BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.
[7] https://tilthighered.com/

- what knowledge experiences are valued.

To give just one example of this in practice, Cathy Davidson (2016) demonstrates the generative outcomes of instituting a mutual and cooperative syllabus creation process among faculty and students for an American Literature course. The goal was to re-center students as part of inclusive pedagogical strategies and create a democratic classroom. In Davidson's (2016) efforts to create what she calls a "problem-posing" classroom, she draws upon Freire's (1970) work to show how she forged an engaged classroom space. Norming activities that established prioritizing voices of all students in the classroom[8], generating a mutually agreed upon class constitution[9], and directed assignments to assist with syllabus-making were all critical to cultivating the classroom faculty and students desired. Davidson's (2016) course and the associated syllabus is but one example that reflects the ways in which syllabus-making can align and reflect constructivist and inclusive philosophies and practices while simultaneously pushing boundaries of the academy to incite new pedagogies.

Other work highlights the importance of understanding classroom spaces as racialized, gendered, and classed landscapes of power where privilege operates in multiple and intersecting forms. These works engage with decolonizing, anti-racist, and social justice pedagogies to consider the possibilities for syllabi to promote and practice inclusivity and power-sharing. For example, scholars who created the Social Justice Syllabus Design Tool (SJSDT) did so with BIPOC students in mind so as to create an experience that "signals belonginess, growth mindset communal goals, clear and positive expectations, and success orientation" (Taylor et al. 2019:133) as BIPOC students often experience the classroom and university as an oppressive and an unwelcoming space. Taylor et al. (2019), for example, note that hostile campus climates, invisibility in the classroom, negative stereotypes, lack of cultural relevancy, and an instructor's fixed mindset about students are just some of the major ongoing challenges students of color face in the classroom. Taylor et al. also (2019) suggest that redesigning the syllabus can be one step to confront these challenges, disrupt privilege and oppressive norms. They recommend drawing from and leveraging literature on syllabus best practices, stereotype threats, and social justice pedagogies to redesign syllabi for social justice.

To this end, the SJSDT emphasizes relationships, community, and process as critical aspects of syllabus making. To cultivate positive relationships, Taylor et al. (2019) argue instructors should consider student-centered syllabi, use warm and inclusive language, and detail expectations for students *and* instructors. To cultivate community, using storytelling to share instructor information, providing engaging course descriptions, and creating course content that shows the value of scholarship from knowledge holders of diverse and intersectional groups is needed (ibid.). Finally, process-oriented considerations include incorporating a "growth mindset" in course objectives and learning outcomes, assignments and grading policies, course outlines, and course content (Taylor et al. 2020:154). The SJSDT provides a series of reflection questions for

[8] Davidson describes how she from Savonick's (2016) recommendations on creating spaces for conversation https://futuresinitiative.org/blog/2016/02/16/creating-spaces-for-conversation-three-strategies/

[9] See https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nPFmWZSlpvxukYbK3BEADM38fI2kRJsgXdRkxG2J-bE/edit?ts=56bba504 for an example of the class constitution.

instructors to consider as they create their syllabus and helpful resources on how to implement suggested ideas in practice.

While there is no one size fits all solution to syllabus-making, a considered syllabus can activate the possibilities supporting inclusion and diversity in the academy. While each course will invariably differ because of the course instructor, unit, curriculum requirements, size of the classroom, institution, class composition, and other factors, a syllabus can catalyze and reflect inclusion and academic transformation. To this end, I have suggested in this piece instructors should engage with syllabi not simply as textual, contract-based documents, but as boundary objects with plural identities that circuit through the academy with social lives of their own. The appended guide provides assistance to instructors on how they can support their students while at the same time promote socially and racially just course design. One compelling entry-point into this process is through activating specific philosophies that uphold inclusive, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, decolonial, and social justice pedagogies and practices.

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