

Read the Damn Syllabus

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, APR 29 2014

One consistent complaint on behalf of professors is that students forget to read or just refuse to read the course syllabus. *Inside Higher Education* ran a story late last year about one faculty member who took his frustration to the next level:

Some things are better worn than said. At least that's what one Austin Community College professor of English thinks, based on his "It's in the syllabus" T-shirt.

A student posted a photo on Reddit and Imgur of David Lydic flashing the shirt this week, with the caption, "Frustrated with the same old questions, my professor ripped off his shirt in the middle of lecture."...

Lydic said in an e-mail that he's been using the shirt for several years, but students' photos of him wearing it never made it further than Facebook, until now.

"No particular question prompts its use," he said. "Every semester I get routine questions that are answered in the syllabus. So every semester about halfway through I put it on and do my schtick about reading the syllabus."

I've faced those sorts of questions, too. Everything from 'how much is the research paper worth?' to 'when is my group presentation?' and 'I've already missed two classes so what happens if I am late for one more class?'. It's all there in the syllabus and, despite encouraging students to read the document, it always seems that some or even many do not.

As the new Summer semester kicks off here at CEFAM I decided I needed to do something about this problem, too. Instead of investing in a t-shirt, I tried out one of the ideas I had found via Colorado State University, namely a syllabus test.

On the first day of class I went through the entire syllabus with the class as I normally do, but I reminded them that part of their assessment for the course would be a short, 10 question multiple choice quiz the following day on the contents of the syllabus. I encouraged them to prepare for the test by reading the syllabus closely and to contact me if they had any questions.

Overnight I had two students of my 25 student class email with questions or for clarification on certain points in the syllabus, and another contacted me to let me know she had found a typo (yes, professors are human after all). I was encouraged by this as it seemed that at least some of the students were taking the request to read the syllabus seriously and preparing for the test.

This morning I distributed the 10 question test and, shortly after, collected them all. Grading them took only a few minutes and what I found was encouraging.

Of the 25 students in the class:

- 3 earned a perfect 10/10

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- 6 earned 9/10
- 12 earned 8/10
- 2 earned 7/10
- 1 earned 6/10
- 1 earned 3/10

What might I conclude from this?

Well my first impression is that the vast majority of the students actually read the syllabus: nearly 85% got either 8, 9 or 10 questions out of 10 correct, something that would have been difficult without reading the syllabus carefully and recalling the information.

The three students who earned 6 or 7 out of 10 I am putting down to being attentive listeners in class and maybe having scanned the syllabus once. Enough to get the general 'gist' of what's expected but not reading for recall or understanding.

And I'm going to assume that the student who got only 3 out of 10 didn't read the syllabus very closely at all.

Overall, I think it's done what I hoped it would do and my students have likely read and hopefully understood the syllabus on Day One of the course. The bigger test will come when I ask a couple of follow up questions: first, to the students, whether they thought this early reading of the syllabus affected the way they prepared for the class, planned their time and managed their workload; second, to myself, whether I see any reduction in the number of those maddening questions to which the reply can only be 'it's in the syllabus'.

It's not a major pedagogical experiment, but I hope it will prove a fruitful one for the CEFAM POL 210 class this summer.

About the author:

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