

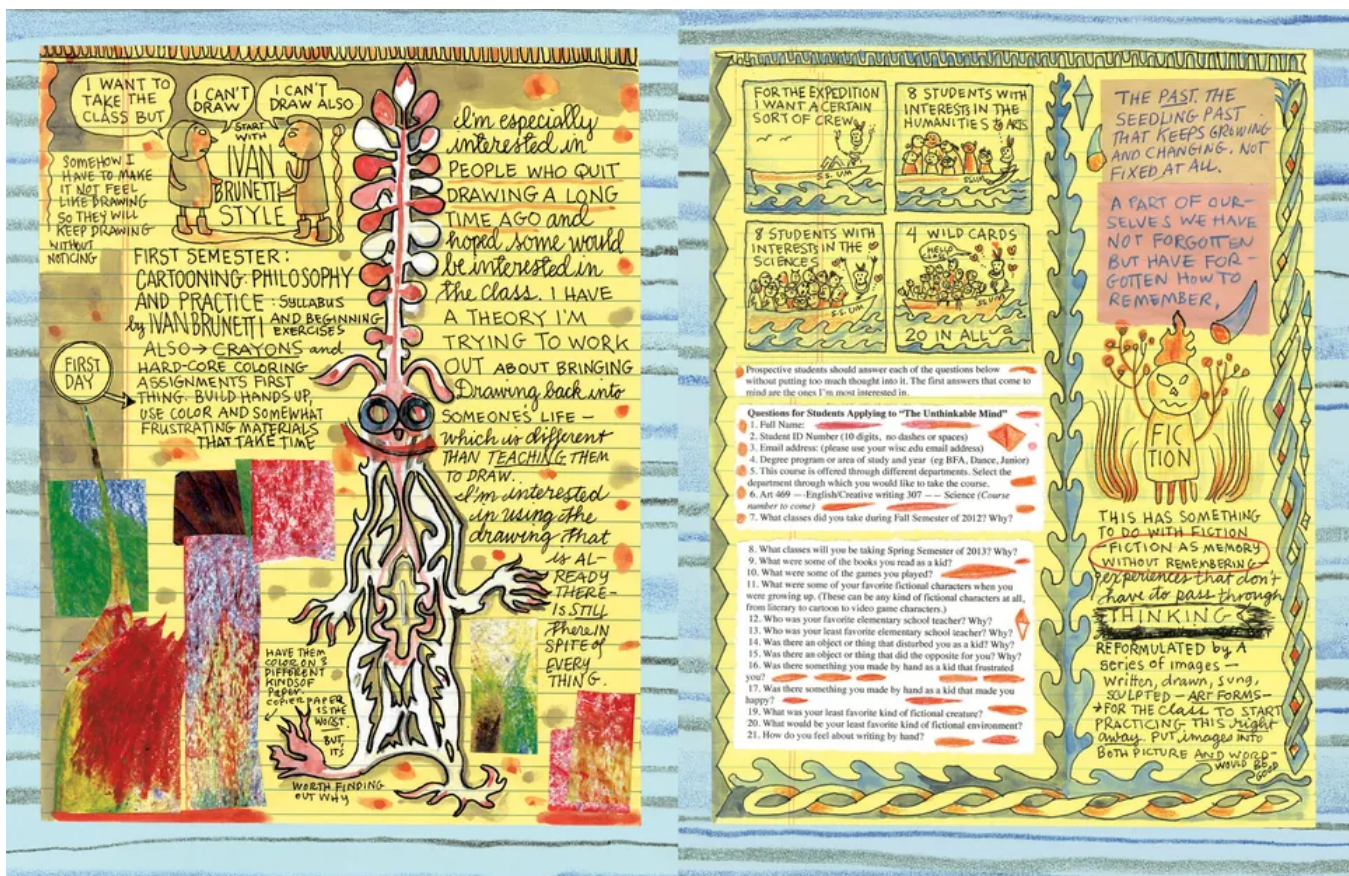
CULTURAL COMMENT

A CELEBRATION OF THE SYLLABUS

Two scholars argue that the syllabus is an overlooked way to reimagine teaching.

By Hua Hsu

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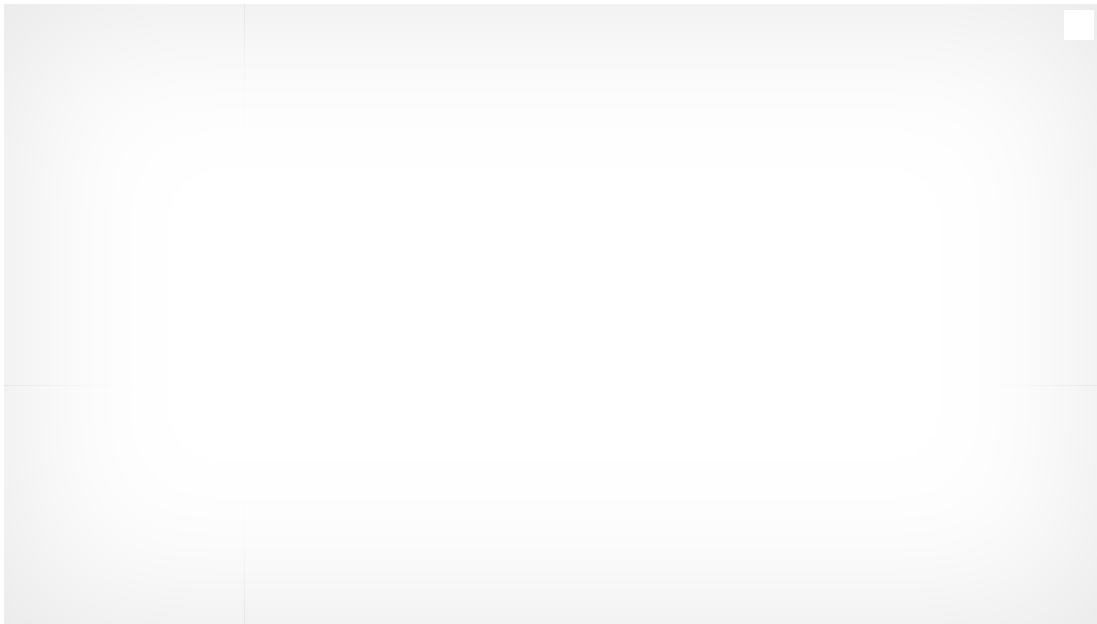
The artist Lynda Barry turned her syllabus into a graphic novel. Art work by Lynda Barry, from "Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor" / Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly



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Back in the days before college was largely virtual, one of the first things you learned as a student was that very little, if anything, happens on the first day of classes. Perhaps you've been waiting for this moment—you're eager to have your mind blown, a mix of awe and self-doubt coursing through you. Usually, the professor gives a brief, ready-made spiel about the class, an overview of expectations and policy, after which you're free to go early. Just be sure to pick up a copy of the syllabus on your way out.

Students and teachers often regard the syllabus as a dull formality. At the most basic level, it's like an itinerary, offering a sense of where a class might go from week to week. It's a checklist, stating what you'll need, when you'll need it, and how you'll be demonstrating that you've done the work. Increasingly, syllabi have a contractual feel, with language carefully vetted by a school's lawyers insuring that classrooms are accessible and free of discrimination. But, as William Germano, a professor of English at Cooper Union, and Kit Nicholls, the director of the Center for Writing at the same institution, argue in "Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything," serving all these purposes means that few people take the syllabus seriously for what it can be: a story.



Maybe you don't know this when the class starts; you're just here to learn something about astronomy or a group of poets. A good story, Germano and Nicholls write, "is driven by not-knowing," just as every thoughtfully designed course should contain "mysteries, problems, as-yet-unresolved difficulties with which students will wrestle all term. Narrative is also driven by turns, transformations, moments of recognition." Importantly, it's up to the students to find their way through this story together, not for the teacher to simply "deliver" it.

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Germano and Nicholls's gently polemical, deeply romantic book regards the syllabus, and the work that goes into constructing one, as an opportunity to ponder the possibilities and pathways of the classroom. The document

“happens to be the classroom’s point of entry, timekeeper, and compass,” they write. Consequently, they argue that it sets a tone for the months to come, revealing the teacher’s philosophies, even the expansiveness of their hopes. “Everything else about your teaching—from anxiety dreams to writing assignments, from understanding testing and what it’s for to your choice of readings and what students are going to do with them—are folded into the innocuous document.”

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The term “syllabus” comes from a fifteenth-century misreading of the Greek word “sittybas,” a “parchment label or title-slip on a book.” But it came into more common usage to refer to a collection of items in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment didn’t just result in a widespread expansion of knowledge; it also meant defining these different domains of knowledge and contemplating what they were for. Over time, education itself became more formalized, disciplines were defined, and something resembling the university emerged; in the early twentieth century, the syllabus became synonymous with the “methodical organization” of knowledge.

Throughout the culture wars of the past half century, the syllabus has been a site of contestation, as reading lists were scrutinized for questions of diversity,

inclusion, and how much canons had changed. In recent years, this understanding of the syllabus as a kind of curated primer on a given topic has become more common outside academic settings. In 2014, the Georgetown historian Marcia Chatelain started the #FergusonSyllabus hashtag in order to explore how the Ferguson, Missouri, uprisings could be meaningfully introduced into classrooms. It was an attempt to more closely align academia with the world outside. The following year, a group of scholars started the #CharlestonSyllabus as a way of contextualizing the histories and politics that converged in a white supremacist's massacre of worshippers at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church. In 2016, a Ph.D. student named Candice Benbow assembled a "Lemonade Syllabus" as a way of bringing together the histories, ideas, and inspirations she and others heard in Beyoncé's album of the same name. There was something powerful and transgressive about adopting the syllabus, with its air of canonicity and expertise, to describe worlds that had grown in the shadows of official neglect.

Despite its title, Germano and Nicholls's book is less interested in actual syllabi than in what this "point of entry" represents. At a time when college teaching has grown increasingly routinized, and a professor's attempts at innovation are pitched as much to the school's internal assessment panels as its students, the authors remind us that education is about moments of spontaneous connection. "You're looking for *opportunities*—those temporal junctures where something special can happen." As such, their book is filled with useful insights about teaching and how, under ideal circumstances, what is transferred isn't a body of knowledge but a kind of "craft," a way of reading and taking in the world. They consider the virtues of being "the biggest goofball in the room," in order to demystify the student-teacher relationship. They write that "the way we gain knowledge is nonlinear and recursive" and that teachers should build in moments of "repetition, regression, leaping ahead" into a course. Maybe one class ends on a note of unease, where it seems like we find ourselves at an

impasse, which gets resolved weeks later.

Germano and Nicholls do discuss a few specimens: the ambitious reading list that W. H. Auden handed out for his survey of European literature, which featured six thousand pages of text and nine operas; a law-school class taught by Barack Obama, built around fifty-page readers compiled by students so they could begin to think like teachers; Gloria Anzaldúa's lengthy syllabus for a feminist-theory course, filled with notes and commentary that undermine the form itself, critiquing traditional notions of mastery and expertise.

The authors of "Syllabus" come across like fantastic and committed teachers, although, in this case, I would have hoped to learn more about their book's purported subject. I would have read hundreds more pages of examples like Auden's and Anzaldúa's. I was drawn to "Syllabus" because, as a student and professor, I have always found the genre fascinating. Some syllabi are mystifyingly brief, others aggressively helpful, filled with pages upon pages of generous encouragement and auxiliary readings. Maybe the instructor has included a stirring epigraph or a striking image to distinguish theirs from all the others. In the case of the artist Lynda Barry, her entire lesson plan takes the form of a graphic novel.

There is a folder on my desktop called "Other People's Syllabi" that I consult whenever I'm stumped building my own. I keep some syllabi because they offer primers for fields of knowledge that I only dimly understand; I keep others because I'm curious about how a peer has taken the same collection of books I teach but shaped them into a far more provocative argument.

The literary-analysis class that David Foster Wallace taught in the nineties included airport thrillers by Jackie Collins, Mary Higgins Clark, and Thomas

Harris. Underneath the course aims, he writes a “WARNING” to students: “Don’t let any potential lightweightish-looking qualities of the texts delude you into thinking that this will be a blow-off-type class.” The writer Lily Hoang included a “[cookie policy](#)” for her M.F.A. fiction-writing workshop. As in, if your phone rings in class, you have to bring cookies for everyone the following week. In 1971, the jazz visionary [Sun Ra](#) taught a course called [The Black Man in the Universe](#) at Berkeley, and the reading list is a fascinating glimpse into his self-made cosmo-mythology, including everything from the Russian occultist Madame Blavatsky to the King James Bible (which Ra referred to as “The Source Book of Man’s Life and Death”) and the Black fiction writer and poet Henry Dumas, who had been killed by a police officer three years earlier.

Few of us produce syllabi that fit within (or illuminate) our œuvre or sensibility the way these examples do. I still look forward to constructing mine, fiddling with old ones, thinking about sequencing as though I were putting together a mixtape, even if the courses rarely go the way I’d intended. A syllabus, as opposed to a monograph or journal article, is one of the rare things an academic writes knowing that it will be read—although perhaps not when we intended, or with the care that we put into its assembly. A syllabus is the beginning of a story but also a leap of faith. You hand it out, it’s no longer yours, and you trust that students will know what to do with it.



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