

Strategy: The Promising Syllabus

A great syllabus does more than just offer students a schedule. A Promising Syllabus is a document that frames your course in a way that lays out to students what they will get if they choose to take advantage of the opportunities found in your course.

Origin

Bain, K. (2004). What the best college teachers do. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, C. C. (2010). The Promising Syllabus enacted: One teacher's experience. *Communication Teacher*, 24(2), 78-90.

Lang, J. M. (August 28, 2006). The Promising Syllabus. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Promising-Syllabus/46748>.

Application

The Promising Syllabus revisits the traditional syllabus and revises the document into a motivating and engaging invitation to students to participate in a course in three parts:

1. An explanation of the course's promise to the students: what will they have gained, in terms of knowledge or skills, by the end of the semester?
2. A description of the activities in which the students will engage to help them fulfill the promise (readings, activities, assignments).
3. The beginning of a conversation about how the teacher and the student will understand the nature and progress of the student's learning.

When incorporating a Promising Syllabus, consider these suggestions (Hirsch, 2010):

1. Emphasize the focus of the course on the student learning through the following questions: What is this course promising students? How does this fit students' life experiences? How will you as an instructor fulfill the promises in this syllabus? How will students show what they have learned?
2. Offer a foundational vocabulary
3. Facilitate, facilitate, facilitate
4. Be prepared to let students make decisions
5. Ask a question for which you do not know the answer and then ask, "How can we work together to answer this question?"
6. Require a major project that allows students to illustrate what they know

Reflection

- How does this compare to what you are already doing?
- What is the promise of your course?
- What do students do to fulfill that promise?
- How do you work with students to measure their progress toward learning?