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Riding the Bow Wave

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A Scrutiny of Syllabi, Part 1—Do Dolphins Sleep?

As I learned more about dolphins, one resource posed the question, "Do dolphins sleep?"—a good question about an air-breather that spends life swimming. I read this at about the time I was contemplating how to deal with an implied assignment that came my way in early May regarding the topic of syllabi. In reading over some publications on syllabi, I thought that if there were ways to induce dolphins to sleep, it might lie in reading that literature to them. Apparently though, enough of our CSUCI Dolphin pod managed to stay awake long enough while confronting the topic in a faculty senate meeting to vote to deep-six a policy on syllabi—a vote followed by a suggestion to pass the problem on "...to Renny and Ed for faculty handbook and development purposes." My interpretation of "development purposes" lies in providing practical information and resources, and being available to assist in constructing or review of syllabi.

Writing to provide practical information on this topic runs the risk of creating a document that is a remedy for insomnia. A colleague from whom I solicited feedback politely found my first attempt "slower reading," (Translation: "Can dolphins snore?") so I decided to assemble useful information on syllabi into three small doses, none of which should require more than a single cup of coffee to digest.

In spite of syllabi not being a strong candidate for most inspirational teaching topic, the lowly syllabus is the most important course document instructors create. It serves as the governing document of the course from start to finish and, when properly

crafted, delivers some serious benefits by helping us: (A) to inform, (B) to provide consistence, (C) to align and integrate, and (D) to encourage learning. This issue of "...Bow Wave" will address parts A and B. These convey the most essential logistical information. These constitute a baker's dozen checklist. While mundane, they are essential. Consider items in the list as akin to parts of an engine. One part left out of the engine may not be apparent at time of assembly, but its absence will manifest in unpleasant ways when the engine is running. Going carefully through a checklist helps prevent our leaving out an essential part.

The act of informing students in writing produces a smoother running class. Obvious critical information for students includes

- 1) Instructor's contact information: phone, e-mail, office building and number and office hours,
- 2) Titles of textbook and/or outside materials needed along with a reminder to bring these to class if they will be used there,
- 3) List of required readings and deadline dates for reading these,
- 4) Any instructional technology requisites such as a class Blackboard site or any supporting web site provided by the instructor or textbook publisher.

The engine sound produced from absence of these parts is a knocking sound—usually on our doors, as one student after another discovers that he/she does not have the information needed to function well. After providing the information twenty-five times to as many individuals, the prospect of constructing a more complete syllabus becomes a calling with unanticipated appeal.

(continued other side)

Items 5-11 promote consistence. The information should be offered in a positive tone that should be perceived as helpful. Providing the items' information in "Thou shalt not..." tones reminiscent of the Ten Commandments can be detrimental.

These items

- 5) Class policy for absences,
- 6) Class policy for missed tests & quizzes,
- 7) Class policy for late work,
- 8) Class policy for extra credit work,
- 9) Class grading method, scale and institutional grade policy,
- 10) Statement concerning academic misconduct and its consequences,
- 11) Statement concerning maintaining a safe and functional learning environment

are rooted in the ethical principle of justice.

Exercise of justice benefits all. For professors, taking action to affirm clearly that all who elect to participate in the class are on the class schedule protects against actions by those who would, perhaps without conscious intent, try to put our lives onto their personal schedules. Treating students as individuals is good practice, but being placed onto individuals' schedules is neither good nor realistic. We can, however, provide a policy that enables us to treat all students equally and serve each well.

For students, an affirmation that all students may engage as equals in learning and have that learning evaluated fairly through the same disclosed ground rules offers both comfort and benefit. Forgetting to include any of the items 5-11 can produce an engine explosion, in which routine practice vanishes in a cloud of smoke the moment a student feels treated arbitrarily. Even one needless dispute over a grade can impact our joy of teaching, and operating with joy is one dolphin-like behavior that we should try to maintain. Further, an appeal will take up our time and that of our faculty and administrative colleagues, who must participate in hearing it. Professors who leave such criteria out of syllabi usually lose such appeals, because they cannot establish that any ground rules exist. Policy statements included in the syllabus can prevent such explosions and help us to take care of others and ourselves.

Our last two items

- 12) Prerequisite courses or skills needed to encounter the material,
- 13) Call to be made aware of students' special needs that might need accommodation

are practical, and their value is best realized by thinking at scales larger than our own courses.

Colleges and universities are not simply in the business of offering courses. Their greater purposes are to promote intellectual growth and to certify graduates through conferring degrees. We faculty spend considerable time in developing coordinated curricula for these purposes. Once our prerequisites and course descriptions appear in a catalog, we also incur a truth-in-advertising responsibility to deliver on the plan we have promised. If, as individuals, we wish to change the course description or prerequisites, we need to do that in consultation with our colleagues and formally change the catalog. Simply making the change in one's own syllabus without such consultation can disrupt curricula and cause problems for others in unexpected places.

In accommodating students' special needs caused by various conditions termed ubiquitously and perhaps not accurately as "disabilities," we champion inclusiveness by ensuring that all who are capable of intellectual growth and earning the benefits of a college degree can do so. Today, the most common admonitions for accommodation rest their advocacy on complying with laws in order to avoid expensive litigation. While it is important that we comply with federal and state law, it is perhaps more important that, as educators, we lead by example and practice beneficence and caring for all in ways that exemplify the benefits of a thoughtful, aware community.

(If you really want to know the answer to the title question regarding dolphins dozing, go to the online archives of Riding the Bow wave via the index URL at bottom of the front page. Bookmark the index link for future use.

(Continued next issue.)