Some Brief Syllabus Advice for the Young Economist

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Abstract

We touch on three major pieces of syllabus language that we think can help young economists manage their economics classes in a liberal arts environment. Like the writing of a constitution, it is not enough to just copy the words on the page in order for them to be effective. Instead they must fit the “facts on the ground” and the day-to-day experiences of students. If the syllabus talks about valuing everyone’s time and yet the classroom experience does not reflect that, the syllabus language is useless. Like constitutions, however, syllabi are useful as a starting point for nurturing a mental model of the rigorous economics inquiry and discourse.

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Introduction

In the field of economic education there are numerous articles on how to teach economics more effectively. For example, edited volumes Becker and Watts (2000), Becker et al. (2007) and Mixon and Cebula (2009) brim with advice on how economists might improve what they are doing in the classroom. These volumes and the economic education journals are filled with articles on how to teach specific courses differently (e.g., Hartley 2001, Coyne and Leeson 2011, and Chamlee-Wright 2011), how to incorporate popular culture (Hall 2007), film clips (Mateer and Stephenson 2011), and even how to use taste tests to teach about protectionism (Powell 2007). To our knowledge, however, there are no articles specifically geared towards economists about syllabus design outside of specific discussion of readings.

This is puzzling given the vast literature aimed at helping the young economist succeed in the Academy. For example, Thomson (2001) is widely read by graduate students in order to become acculturated to the profession. Similarly, Hamermesh (1992) provides advice to the young economist on professional etiquette that can be generally viewed as good career advice. There also exists advice for specific sub-groups within economics, from women (Hamermesh 2005), individuals looking for teaching positions (Owens 2008), and even Austrian economists interested in liberal arts college jobs (Horwitz 2011). While this advice benefits young economists by getting them to be thoughtful about their teaching, research, and interactions with fellow economists, it is a bit surprising that none of this literature touches at all on the classroom syllabus and the policies laid out therein.

In our opinion, this gap represents an important oversight. Many young economists become bogged down in the first few years of teaching because they have not had the time nor experience to think about how best to structure their syllabus. By “syllabus structure” we do not mean which readings are assigned when, or what textbook will be used, or whether to emphasize lecture or discussion. Instead we are concerned about how exactly a faculty member’s expectations for the class get expressed to students through the syllabus. In our experience, young faculty members often encounter trouble because of differences between their expectations and those of the students. The most obvious case of this is with respect to grading, but teaching is filled with other examples such as availability for consultation outside of class, participation criteria, and so on. Confusing or incomplete expectations in the syllabus inhibits the development of student agency and responsibility in the classroom itself.

What follows is a discussion of syllabus language that touches on three different areas of expectation management: managing out-of-class time, leading effective classroom discussion, and setting and maintaining grading expectations. While we are largely in agreement about these three points, the language and discussion in the first two come primarily from Emily Chamlee-Wright’s experience and the latter from Joshua Hall. As we point out later in the article, much of what we discuss here has come to us from a variety of different sources and influences. Thus we do not claim that these practices are
unique or originated with us. At the same time, we hope that by discussing them in this format more economists, particularly young economists setting out on their careers, will be exposed to and benefit from these elements of syllabus design that foster better expectation alignment.

Managing Your Time Outside of Class:

One of the perennial problems professors face is how to manage time with students outside of class time. This issue is particularly pressing for faculty in small liberal arts colleges where the expectation is that faculty will remain accessible to and develop close mentoring relationships with their students. Regular and posted office hours have become a sacred cow in such institutions. The assumption is that by maintaining regular office hours, students will know when they can find their professors and their professors will be accessible and eager to receive students during these appointed times. Experience suggests, however, that the exact opposite is true.

First, most faculty choose office hours that are spaced apart in such a manner that they complement their teaching schedule. So if the faculty member has no classes on Monday-Wednesday-Friday from 10:00-11:00, this may look like an ideal time to hold office hours. But this time is likely to overlap with courses that students are taking, making it impossible for them to come during this particular time slot. They thus default to the “or by appointment” option, to which I turn in a moment. Non-course time slots in the weekly schedule—at Beloit College, where I taught for 19 years, there are no courses offered between 4:00-7:00—are no more helpful, as such times are cordoned off for co-curricular activities. In short, students are busy. No particular time slot, even if the number of hours is generous, is likely to work for the majority of advisees and students in one’s classes.

Second, when office hours don’t get used, faculty tend to rely on that time as prep time, grading time, or finishing that article to meet the deadline time. The unfortunate student who actually avails him or herself of the option to utilize the designated office hours is likely to encounter a professor who is now stressed out by they fact that she no longer has the time she had grown accustomed to using for other purposes. In short, the notion that faculty are eagerly awaiting students’ arrival during their office hours is a myth. Smart busy people find productive ways to fill that time when it is not used regularly. Smart busy people come to rely on that space in their day, and they are not likely to be focused on the student before them if their work plan has been interrupted.

Thinking this through has led me to adopt a “meetings by appointment only” policy. I have the one-line version of this policy posted on my door, but in my economics courses I use the following parable to explain my policy. Even though it takes up an inordinate amount of real estate on my syllabus, I figure that the real estate is cheap and the economic lesson it conveys is valuable.
Office Hours (a story of social coordination through the ages): Once upon a time, office hours were the low cost way of solving a coordination problem: Student needs to talk to Professor; Student stops by Professor’s Office. Alas, Professor has gone to think Deep Thoughts somewhere other than The Office. Student leaves frustrated. Then, someone invents the “Office Hour,” a stretch of time in which Professor commits to thinking Deep Thoughts in The Office, ready to receive the company of any Student who comes by. Coordination problem solved! But, Professor notices a consistent and abhorrent waste of our most precious resource: Time. Professor observes that frequently Students do not use the appointed Office Hours, thus unnecessarily confining Deep Thinking to The Office when Professor is sure that much Deeper Thinking could be done over a latte (vente, non-fat please) in the café. At other times, say, just before a midterm exam, Professor notices a multitude of Students lined up (wasting their Time) outside Professor’s door, all competing for what is now an all too scarce slice of Office Hour. The ubiquity of the telephone was an improvement (“Professor, may I schedule an appointment at 2:00 on Tuesday?”) but still required Professor to be in the office to receive Student’s telephone call. The dawn of the answering machine helped, but Student frequently failed to leave a number or, when call was returned, Roommate never gave Student the message from Professor that, “no, 2:00 will not work, but how about 7:00 am? Bring coffee please.” Just when Professor was ready to give in to the barbaric waste of Time, some wise and gentle soul invented Email. With Email, Student could send Note: “Would love to meet with you this week. I am free on Thursday between 2:00 and 4:00,” to which Professor responds, “That would be lovely. If you like, we can meet over lattes at 2:00.” How civilized! No wasted hours trapped amongst the dusty old books, when a walk to fetch a caffeinated beverage would surely dredge up those Deep Thoughts from the dark recesses of the mind. No wasted time waiting in lines outside Professor’s door. Ah, the emancipating power of Email and the phrase, “Meetings can be arranged by appointment.”

By the way, Tuesdays and Thursdays are the best days to arrange an appointment with me. When requesting an appointment, please suggest several times that can work with your schedule.

As I suggest above, one of the critical benefits this policy conveys, at least in my experience, is that I feel prepared to receive the student who has made an appointment to see me at 2:00 on Thursday afternoon. At ten minutes before the hour my Google Calendar reminder pops up with “2:00 Meeting with Amanda RE: Senior thesis.” I search for my last email exchange with Amanda, quickly remind myself of the thesis she is attempting to pursue and the issues she was facing in the last draft. This takes, at most, five minutes. When Amanda arrives, I am mentally prepared and collegially receptive. With this system, no student ever feels like they have interrupted me or thrown me off my plans for the day.
The “meetings by appointment only” policy offers one further benefit in that it sets appropriate expectations for professional life. Once students graduate, when and where will they ever again face the “regular office hours regime”? I dare say, never. I doubt seriously that on his first day of work Young Graduate will hear his new boss say, “Young Graduate, I will set aside 2:00-4:00 every Tuesday and Thursday for you to come see me, or not, as you see fit. Don’t bother making an appointment. You can rest assured that I will be there waiting for you.” Preparing students to meet expectations beyond the college environment is one of the most important things we do as educators, and the office hour regime runs counter to this purpose. In professional life, we make (and keep) appointments. There is no good reason not to establish this practice in the college years.

I should offer this note of caution. I instituted this policy as a tenured full professor at Beloit College, knowingly violating Beloit’s Administrative Policy Manual. Silly rules are easy to make fun of and ignore as a senior member of the faculty, but my junior colleagues would often say, “your approach sounds like such a smart way to manage time with students, but I don’t want this to come back and haunt me in my tenure review.” I like to think that at Beloit faculty and administrative colleagues would never hold a nagging policy violation against someone in their review so long as they were living up to the intended spirit of the rule. Yet I understand my junior colleagues’ concerns. And in another institution, one that does not value common sense as much as my Beloit colleagues do, there may be very good reasons to be concerned. Thus, before instituting such a practice, junior faculty would be wise to seek official sanction from a department chair or appropriate administrative supervisor. One might propose this as an experiment that can inform future debate on the subject. Any innovative chair or dean ought to welcome fresh ideas and faculty experimentation that can improve faculty-student interaction.

**Developing Intellectual Agency through Formal Class Discussion**

I love to lecture. And I particularly prize the pedagogical value of a well-crafted lecture. That said, even the best lectures—even those that are appropriately interactive and engaging—can leave many students with the sense that their primary job is simply to absorb what the professor has said. In order to reinforce the point that students are expected to be active contributors in the production of new knowledge, I have always integrated discussions of primary texts into my courses. I do this at the introductory level and increase the emphasis on discussion in courses taught later in the curriculum, culminating in a senior seminar course that is almost entirely focused on discussion and development of original research.

Anyone who practices class discussion on a regular basis is familiar with the common frustrations: passive students who never say anything, students who dominate the discussion and crowd out more reluctant students; discussions that go off track; the difficulties of knowing how to grade student contribution in discussions, and so on. The framework for formal discussions I offer below is not a panacea, but it goes a long way toward addressing some of these common frustrations. Most importantly, the rules of
formal discussion I deploy foster the expectation that students will contribute to (not merely absorb) the body of knowledge that informs the field of inquiry we are studying.

Let me begin with a disclaimer that I have not come up with these rules on my own. Shamelessly, I have adapted them from Liberty Fund seminar rules. They are described below, as I describe them to my students.

**Formal Discussion Rules:***

Discussions will begin promptly at the start of class and run (without break) for 90 minutes. Please come on time and prepared to sit for that length of time. If you do need to step out, try to do so quietly.

Chairs and tables will be arranged in a rectangle in advance. (If you arrive early and the chairs are not arranged this way, please help by making the appropriate adjustments.) Students will be assigned specific seats with the placement of nameplates. Nameplates are used to encourage mutual reference between discussion participants, e.g., “I want to respond to something John said earlier…”

The discussion will begin with the Discussion Leader (that’s me) highlighting some points within the reading and posing questions to which discussion participants might wish to respond. These questions will be posted on the course website in advance. My introductory remarks should take no more than 10-15 minutes, leaving the balance of the discussion time for discussion participants to respond to my queries, present your own questions, and respond to other discussion participants. This means that you are duty-bound to come prepared, with the text read very carefully, with notes and/or questions written down so that you can contribute to a lively and engaged discussion.

After I finish my introductory remarks, the “queue” is then opened for participants to respond and/or pose their own questions. You may indicate your interest in making a comment by raising your hand upward. If, while another discussion participant is speaking you decide that you would like to make your own points, you should “catch my eye” by raising your hand quietly, and wait for a silent nod indicating that you have been placed on the queue.

If discussion participants wish to make a *very brief* comment that pertains to something that was *just* said, you can be put on the “brief comment” queue which allows you to get your short point in right away before the conversation moves too far beyond the specific issue being raised. Participants wishing to be put on the short comment queue indicate this by putting their finger and thumb together (as if to say, “this will be short, I promise.”) A position within the brief comment queue does not eliminate a position in the main queue. This helps to assure that brief comments remain brief and that participants will have time to
articulate their longer points when their turn in the long comment queue comes around.

The Discussion Leader may participate in both queues, but she will have to abide by the same rules as everyone else (i.e., I have to wait my turn just like everyone else). The Discussion Leader does however reserve the right to change the order of the queue toward the end of the discussion time to make sure that everyone who wants to speak gets the chance. The Discussion Leader also reserves the right to cut short comments that go on too long and to take other appropriate measures necessary to maintaining order and decorum.

Mutual respect is an absolute in these discussions. That said, one can be respectful while still engaging in lively argument. Striking this balance is the key to a successful discussion and is the responsibility of everyone at the table.

Each discussion day, students will earn 0 to 10 points. A score of “0” is attributed to those who do not attend on the designated discussion day and time. A score of “2” is attributed to those who attend but appear inattentive or disengaged from the discussion. A score of “5” is attributed to those who attend, do not say anything, but who appear to be engaged and are focused on the conversation. (Now, I know what you are thinking. “How does she know whether I am engaged or disengaged? She cannot read my thoughts!” True enough. But I can tell whether you appear to be engaged—or not—and this makes a difference. A student who appears to be disengaged creates a negative externality that causes the slow death of what might otherwise have been a lively discussion. Students who appear to be engaged, even if they are silent, encourage others to continue their active participation, hence the 5 points.) The student who speaks up a few times during the course of the discussion earns 7 points. The student who offers frequent thoughtful commentary, connects their comments to the comments of others, sparks debate, etc., earns 10 points. While it is perfectly acceptable to not speak on any given discussion day, consecutive discussion days with no active participation earn successively lower scores.

Weekly grades will be posted, using a system of anonymous codes, on the course website.

I have used this formal discussion methodology for the past six years or so. There are some costs. At first, students can greet the formal rules with reluctance. “In my other classes, I get to chime in whenever I want,” say some students. Yet the corresponding benefit is that for these students, the queue acts as a governor, giving them space but not at the expense of other more reluctant students.

The rules do not completely solve the problem that some students won’t contribute much to the discussion. The formal grading process, however, does provide an incentive to at least try, and if a reluctant student weighs in with even two brief comments in a given discussion, the posted grades for the week gives them
immediate feedback that such contributions make a difference. Most importantly, the rules make it perfectly clear that it is the student’s responsibility to enter into the discussion. The professor does not pick and choose a single student out of a sea of raised hands. If a student raises her hand, she gets a spot on the queue. That is all that is required. Their discussion grade is entirely in their control.

One of the things students don’t like when they first encounter these rules is that the discussion often ebbs and flows between and across different discussion topics raised within a given reading. The queue dictates what is said next. This means that one topic may get abandoned (temporarily) as the next person on the queue raises a different point, only to be brought back up again by a student further down in the queue. A few weeks with the rules, however, give students an opportunity to experience what I call the “Liberty Fund Rules (LFR) Magic”. The LFR Magic is the phenomenon whereby a discussion that at first appears to be scattered across and jumping between disparate themes, at some point, begins to cohere. Forced to listen to their fellow discussion participants while they wait for their spot on the queue, students often discover and describe connections between readings or ideas or topics that they didn’t see on their own. As the course proceeds through the semester, this thematic looping can happen between topics addressed across the entire term, lending coherence to the course as a whole.

While I am an enthusiastic advocate of these formal rules, I wish to offer the following words of advice:

- In order for the rules to work, the discussion leader must keep a strict discipline in managing the queue. The instructor should not be tempted to bypass one student for another (except to favor a quiet student toward the very end of the session). Students will notice and the instructor will lose legitimacy as a discussion leader if she breaks with the discipline of the queue.
- The formal discussion rules will only work if they are practiced regularly (so students can gain confidence operating within the rules) and consistently. Introducing two or more different rule structures in the same course will be confusing and the more formal process will meet with greater resistance.
- The discussion leader should never violate the rules to get his or her point in first. I often will put myself on the queue only hear another discussion participant make my point before I have the opportunity to do so. In such cases, I quietly count this as a “win” on my mental scorecard and cross my name off the list.
- A neat circular or rectangular table arrangement and the name templates are essential components in building a learning community. If students do not face one another and do not know one another’s names, they will direct their commentary to the professor rather than to each other. The discussion leader should make sure that the nameplates are printed on a high quality cardstock; that everyone’s name is spelled correctly; replace the nameplates if they get damaged; and bring the nameplates to and collect them after each discussion.
This may sound a bit obsessive. But I believe that the precise table placement and the nameplates have a kind of ritual effect, transforming a regular classroom into a wonderfully special place in which students become the co-creators of their own intellectual emancipation.

**Successfully Framing Grading Standards**

Often students are upset about grading because they feel they have earned an A. Grade inflation is a real problem in higher education. In small departments (like at most liberal arts colleges), grade inflation can be especially problematic as students are advanced onto future classes for which they are unprepared. Thus grade inflation in earlier classes produces negative spillovers onto faculty downstream in the form of unprepared students or students unwilling to accept appropriate grading standards. Over time, concern over grades can often result in even the hardest grader easing up.

At our institution we have written grading standards in our Academic Policy Manual (APM). In order to mentally prepare students for my relatively “tough” grading, I copy these standards directly from our APM into my syllabus. I also include a little joke that highlights the fact that, while I am not curving to meet that standard, students should not expect to come out of the class with everybody earning As and Bs.

Here is the language in the Section titled “Grading Philosophy” as it recently appeared in my syllabi:

**Grading Philosophy**

I have no pre-set grade distribution in mind. Note, however, that Section IX of the Beloit College Academic Policy Manual (APM) clearly discusses the definitions of specific grades (see http://www.beloit.edu/apm/). According to the APM, grades of A are for “credit earned in a manner that demonstrates unusual ability and distinctive achievement.” B grades are for “credit earned in a manner that demonstrates articulate, above-average performance” and C grades are for “credit earned in a manner that demonstrates satisfactory performance.”

I note this language for two reasons. First, I want to highlight that a C is not a failing grade. It is, by definition, satisfactory performance. Unless your class is Lake Wobegon (“where everyone is above average”), several of you might find yourselves in and around that range. This grade merely reflects that while your work is satisfactory, you need further work on certain concepts, skills, or capabilities. Second, it is important to note that A’s are rewarded for exceptional performance. Any questions regarding a particular grade must be made with reference to why your performance was mischaracterized.
This can be thought of as the beginning of properly framing grading standards in a classroom. The above is insufficient in that many students have little idea what “above-average” or “exceptional” performance might entail. Unlike a 100-yard dash where students can easily know how much slower they are than Usain Bolt, students often do not have a good idea of other student’s performance in written assignments or non-multiple choice exams. Thus it is hard to demonstrate to students how their efforts fail to meet a classroom standard.

In order to provide a student with a standard that helps to frame the professor’s grade expectations, I often use anonymous student answers as the answer key. That way a student can directly see how their work stacks up to their peers. While this requires a little more work than other approaches, it has at least two benefits. First, I do not have to come up with an answer key directly. Second, students can see first-hand the anonymous answers of their peers. For many college students, this is the first time they are directly confronted with strong evidence that they are not working as hard or not doing as high quality work as their classmates. In my experience this approach (and the conversations that the approach creates the space for) engenders the proper response in many students. For some students the proper response might be accepting their C grade, while for others it means stepping up their effort in order to obtain a higher grade. The key advantage is that the focus is off the faculty member for giving unfair grades and back on the student for failure to meet classroom standards.

Here is an example of the language I use in my syllabus to describe my grading approach for a take-home final exam in an upper level elective course in economics:

Exams

The final exam will be delivered to you by Sunday, April 29th and will be due by noon on Saturday, May 5. As with the midterm, I ask that it be emailed to me as well as delivered to me via hard copy to my office.

I ask for them in both forms so I can provide an answer key and in order to employ my grading approach (see below). For each exam you will be given a list of n questions, from which you will have to answer n-1 questions. You will typically have a week to work on these exams. The recipe for success on the exams therefore is to pay good attention in class and take good notes, so that you will be able to come up with appropriate answers fairly quickly. Class lectures are generally not sufficient background for doing well on the questions, however, thus you need to revisit and employ the underlying readings in your answers.

My grading standard for these questions is not the answer I would give. You do not want to be held to that standard. Instead, the standard is a relative one. In my opinion, being “correct” is only sufficient to get you to 80 percent. Some correct answers are better than others because they are:
1) better written, 2) more nuanced, 3) incorporate relevant outside material, 4) clearly synthesize the relationship among readings, 5) etc.

Thus in grading, I read all of the answers to one question, checking to see if they are correct and looking for the “best” answer. The “best” answer receives 100 percent of the value for that question and becomes the standard by which the other answers are judged. It is possible to have other answers be so close that they also receive perfect grades, but this only happens occasionally. All other correct answers will then be placed somewhere on the 100 to 80 percent continuum, depending on the quality of the answer. This process is then repeated for each question on the exam. Each exam is worth 25 percentage points of your final grade.

In my experience, this approach has led to a separating equilibrium. The competitive students (not always the best students) work really hard to try to get the “best” grade on a particular question. In order to do so, they have to go back to the original readings and engage with those texts as well as the secondary literature. The “best” answers will often draw on numerous relevant papers that we did not have time to cover in class. From my perspective this is a great outcome because I can tell it stimulated a tremendous amount of out-of-class effort and learning.

The second group can be thought of as satisficers. These students do the bare minimum necessary to make their answers correct in order to get the B- they want. The only time I have difficulty is when a person thinks they are being competitive but is actually a satisficer, but that situation is quickly resolved when they are confronted with the “best” answers and I ask them how their answers are comparable.

**Concluding Remarks**

Here we have touched on three major pieces of syllabus language that we think can help young economists in thinking through how they want to manage their economics classes. Like the writing of a constitution, it is not enough to just copy the words on the page in order for them to be effective. Instead they must fit the “facts on the ground” and the day-to-day experiences of students. If the syllabus talks about valuing everyone’s time and yet the classroom experience does not reflect that, the syllabus language is useless. Like constitutions (Wenzel, 2010) however, syllabi are useful as a starting point for nurturing a mental model of the rigorous economics inquiry and discourse.
References


