Teaching a Good First Day of Class: Exploring Learner-Centered and Inclusive Syllabi Design

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Our objectives

1 **Reflect** on teaching values and goals for the first day of class

2 **Examine** and revise a course syllabus component through equity-minded practices

3 **Plan** a first day of class activity(ies) by choosing one principle that aligns to equity-minded practices

Reflection Activity #1: Introductions

Name and department

Courses you will teach Fall 2022

What is one of your teaching and learning values?

What is one thing you hope to accomplish during a first day of class?

What is one thing you'd like students to walk away with that day?
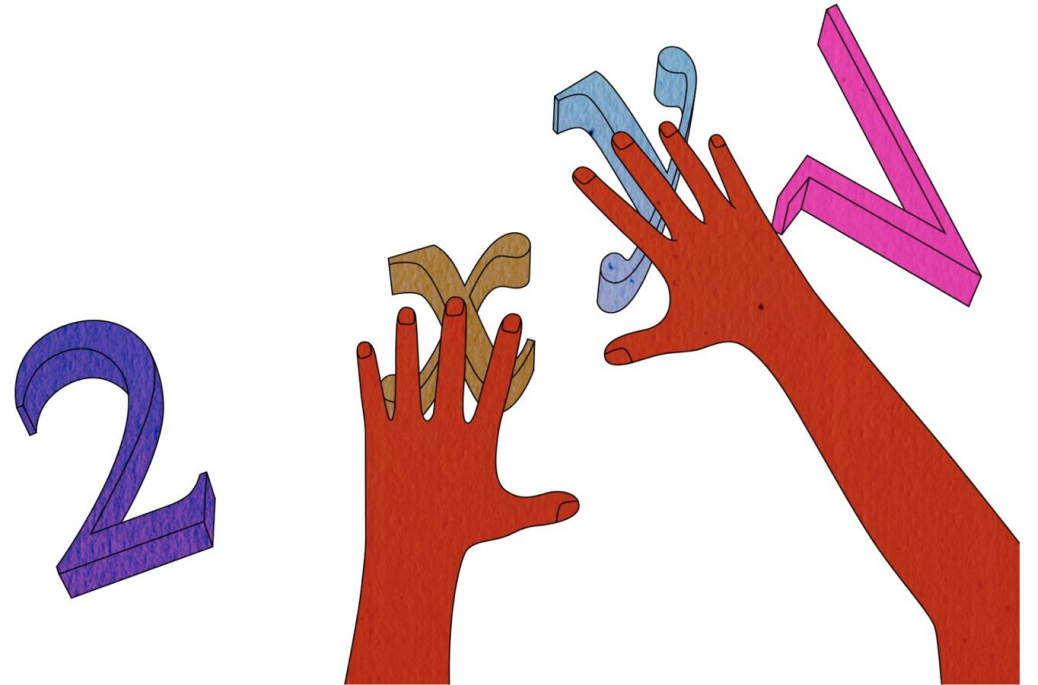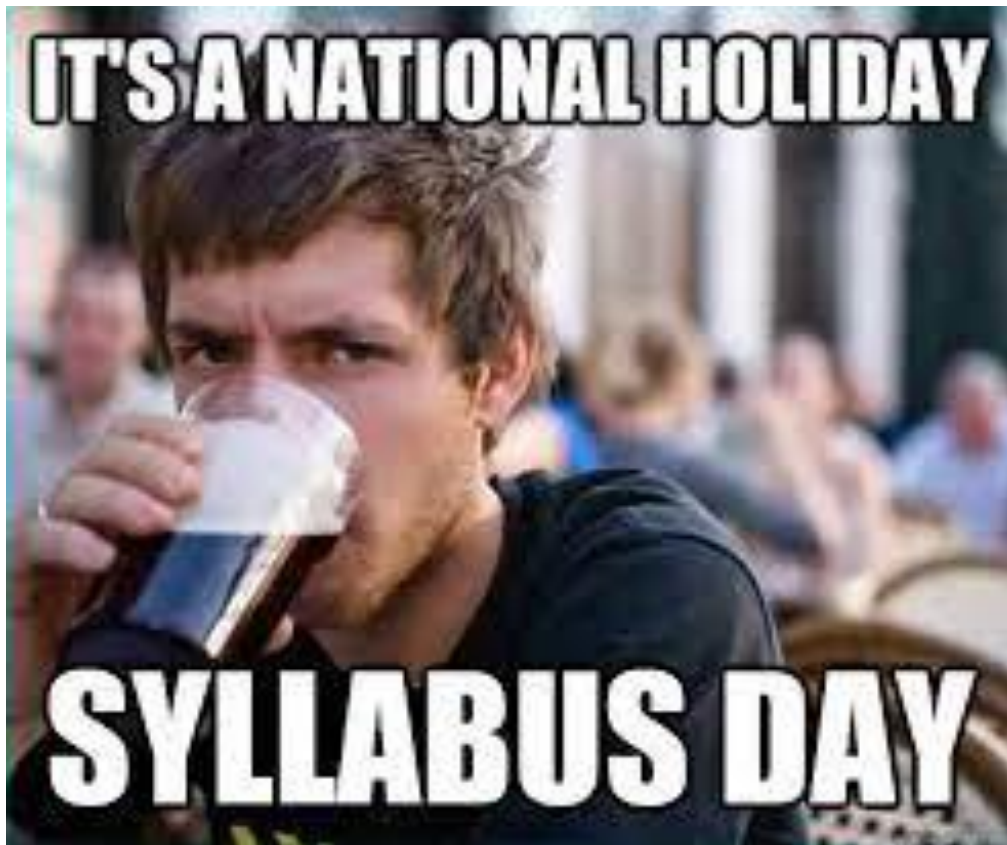
Rethink "syllabus day"

ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC PETERSEN

Don't mistake content delivery with teaching and learning. Find ways to engage students in activities that cause them to reflect and process.

What do our students value during a first day of class and in course syllabi?

- First Impression matters
- Making connections with topics of interest
- Sense of community
- Going over the syllabus and clarifying questions
- Positive language and diction

MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

How does language in syllabus affect student learning?

"Syllabus tone sets the mood for the class and can range from pleasant and welcoming to formal and disciplinary or even condescending and demeaning" (Slattery et al., 2014).

- Shapes students' first impression of instructor and their attitudes toward teaching and learning (Harnish et al., 2011)

- Perceptions of friendly language result in viewing instructor as warm and approachable and highly motivated to teach (Harnish et al., 2011).

- Pleasant and welcoming can language encourages and motivates learners
  - readers are more likely to recall information more easily than when they believe the language is unfriendly or punitive (Littlefield, 1991 as cited in Slattery et al., 2005)
  - harsh language can be intimidating and discouraging for some students (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002; Singham, 2005) and as such, hinders their success.

For some faculty members, the syllabus is a guide that outlines what learners should expect in a course and clarifies what is expected of them. For students, the syllabus helps them figure out what they need to do to ensure they will pass the course. However, in many ways the syllabus conveys so much more than rules and course expectations and as such, serves a larger purpose that can shape the students' academic experiences and foster their success. In traditional syllabi that focus on rules and course expectations, instructors outline basic course requirements. However, with well-crafted syllabi, faculty design learning experiences that positively shape and alter how students perceive their instructors and seek assistance for academic challenges.

In this resource, we outline the traditional purpose of the syllabus, use findings from empirical and peer-reviewed articles to answer questions that are often asked about syllabi, and offer examples of language for 'labi that support or hinder learners' experiences.

NDARD PURPOSE OF THE SYLLABUS
nts:
es learners with the expectations and required components of a
Harnish & Bridges, 2011).
urse expectations and goals along with the grading system
learners' performance (Canada, 2013; Dowd &
Slattery & Carlson, 2005).
tone and motivates learners to set goals that are
ttery et al., 2005).

Syllabus Review: Equity-Minded Approach

- Demystifying college policies and practices
- Welcoming students and creating classroom culture in which they feel cared for and supported
- Validating students' ability to be successful
- Creating a partnership in which faculty and students work together to ensure success
- Representing a range of racial/ethnic experiences and backgrounds in assignments, readings, and other materials
- Deconstructing the presentation of white students as the "norm"

From: Syllabus Review Guide for Equity-Minded Practice from the Center for Urban Education

Syllabi Sample

- **Welcoming**: Motivational, supportive, and caring
- **Partnership**: Student success and partners in learning
- **Demystifying policies:** flexibility? Student needs?

Reflection Activity #2: Equity-minded practices & syllabus components

Choose one equity-minded practice that enhances your values:

- Demystifying college policies and practices
- Welcoming students and creating classroom culture in which they feel cared for and supported
- Validating students' ability to be successful
- Creating a partnership in which faculty and students work together to ensure success
- Representing a range of racial/ethnic experiences and backgrounds in assignments, readings, and other materials
- Deconstructing the presentation of white students as the "norm"

Choose one Syllabus Component:

- Where in your syllabus do you hope to develop/expand upon, revise this equity-minded practice and why?
  - Course description or introduction to the course
  - Teaching philosophy statement
  - Description of assignments or projects,
  - Grading policies/assessments
  - Course/university policies
  - Tentative schedule layout
  - Readings and resources
  - Student support services
  - Others?

UTRGV SaLT HIS Equity-Minded Feedback Review

1. Share with your small group the equity-minded practice and the syllabus component you wish to develop

2. Each faculty member shares their syllabus (only that one component) on shared screen

3. Others comment and provide feedback informed by SaLT Framework questions (focus on only one lens/one set of questions rather than all of them at once)

UTRGV SaLT HSI Equity-Minded Feedback Review Lenses

Note: Designed by Alyssa G. Cavazos and Lesley Chapa (2021) and modified by Alyssa G. Cavazos and Alonso Troncoso (2022) informed by research, reviews, and feedback from Student Teaching Consultants and Faculty Partnerships

Lens	Questions
Inclusivity & Accessibility	To what extent is the professor responsive to inclusivity and accessibility in the language they use?
	How is student voice, agency, and empowerment reflected in the language used to describe the course, assignments, expectations?
	How does (or can) the instructor seek feedback from students on their teaching practices and students' learning progress in the course?
Engagement/Relevance of Curriculum	To what extent are the assignments or activities engaging and relevant to a student's life and/or career/academic aspirations?
	How is the course responsive to students' interests, passions, goals? How effective are these in engaging students?
	How does the course build on students' self-efficacy (belief in ability to succeed) and aspirational capital (hopes and dreams despite inequities) through growth mindset?
	How can the instructor build relevance of curriculum and engagement through the language used?
Grading policy and feedback/assessment practices	To what extent is the course grading, feedback to learner, and assessment practices equity-minded and differentiated or guided to ensure all students' ability to demonstrate learning, engagement, and empowerment through a growth mindset?
	How are or can the assessment practices be balanced in the course (e.g., quizzes, exams, projects, essays, activities, presentations, group activities, homework, etc.)?
	How can the instructor challenge common assessment assumptions (e.g., demonstrate learning in one way, one assessment is better than others, one assessment for all students/all context)?
	How can the instructor invite students into the conversation through feedback on learning and negotiate assessment practices for student growth?
Representation	Who and what languages are overrepresented and underrepresented in readings, guest speakers, collaborations?
	How are different perspectives represented in the course, including student voices as well?
	How does the instructor create a sense of belonging (academic and social) among all the students in the course?
Implicit Bias	What does the language used in the teaching document assume about students' access to resources, prior knowledge, prior schooling experiences, literacy and language background, technology, books, car, travel, cultural background, etc.?
	If applicable, how can the instructor convey awareness of sociohistorical context of exclusionary practices and racism in higher education that contribute to student inequities in learning?
	How can the instructor seek students' and/or others' perspectives to help identify implicit biases in teaching?

Teaching a Good First Day of Class

How can we link our teaching values, equity-minded practice, and syllabus component we selected to our first day of class activities?

How to Teach a Good First Day of Class

Advice Guide by James Lang

First Day of Class: Four Principles

Principle No. 1: Curiosity

- Spark curiosity
- Center around deep questions/problems
- Find out their interests, passions, motivations

Principle No. 2: Community

- Humanize yourself
- Get students talkin' with one another
- Greet students & walk around (get to know them—class, hometown, major, etc.)

First Day of Class: Four Principles

Principle No. 3: Learning

- Actively engage students in the learning that will happen in the class
- "Ask students to try a cognitive task before they are ready"
- "Invite students to think about the course from a metacognitive perspective"

Principle No. 4: Expectations

- Review overall parameters of course: materials, assessments, policies, key dates and deadlines
- Dedicate time to answer questions

A student's perspective on a meaningful first day of class

What makes a meaningful first day?

What does the workload look like?	Is my professor receptive to student needs?
How is the course material relevant to my life experiences?	Do I feel a sense of belonging?

How are Lang's Four Principles enacted in my experiences?

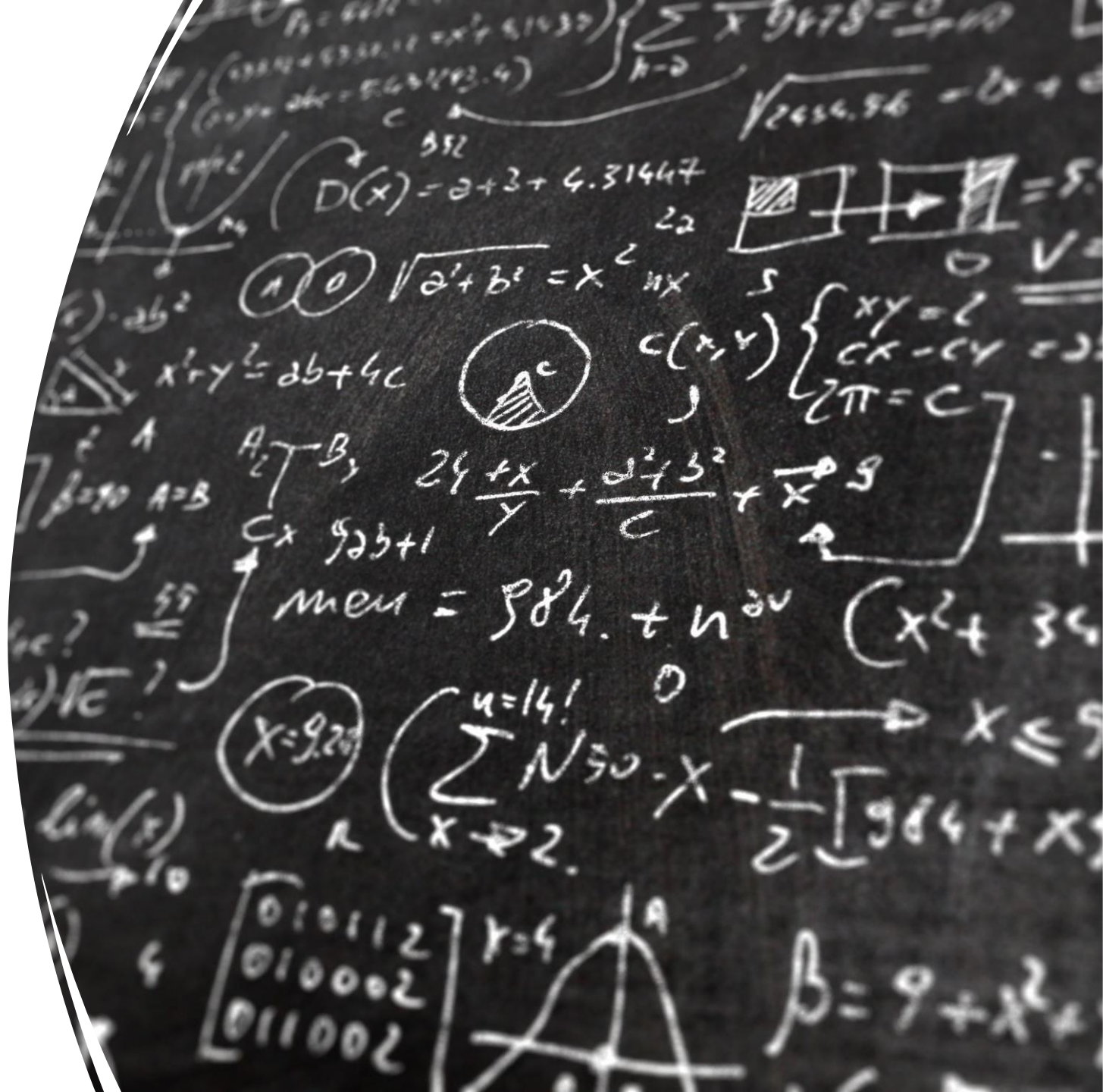- Expectations
- Learning
- Community
- Curiosity

Examples of first day of class activities

- English Composition
- A History Survey Course
- An Upper-Level Psychology Course
- A Mathematics Course

[How to Teach a Good First Day of Class](#)

[Advice Guide by James Lang](#)

My reflections/examples

English 4342: Responding to and Assessing Student Writing

Syllabus Snapshot

My name is **Alyssa G. Cavazos**, and I am thrilled to teach this class and be your professor this semester!

alyssa.cavazos@utrgv.edu
Here's my e-mail. Please e-mail me with questions, comments, thoughts or schedule a time to talk about your writing & learning

We will write and create new meanings as we draw on **our full literacy and language resources.**

We will **elicit and provide meaningful feedback** on our writing, learning, and teaching processes.

Please submit **drafts, revise, reflect, rethink, and reimagine** your writing to fulfill the "B" default grade and beyond as you wish.

I value **your voice, intentions, and goals as writers**, and I care about your success in the course. If you are experiencing challenges reach out to me and we will find solutions collaboratively.
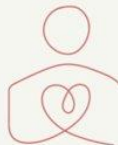
Our journey together will expose us to different perspectives, challenge our thinking, and lead us to new and exciting paths in writing and learning.

Writer Agency:
A Labor-Based Grading Approach
Dra. Alyssa G. Cavazos

My feedback will...	Your agency as a writer will...
focus on growth and reflection on learning	build on your reflective skills for growth and learning
pose questions and challenge	elicit meaningful feedback
resist monolingual views to elevate la diversidad de lenguajes en la creación de nuevos conocimientos	Negotiate and navigate language choices and feedback with intention & purpose by drawing on your full linguistic repertoire
build on your prior knowledge & experiences	create new meanings through revision
encourage different perspectives	synthesize different perspectives
inspire conversations	Reimagine writing ideas & creations

Reflection Activity #3: First Day of Class Principles and Activities

- What principle would you like to focus on (e.g., curiosity, community, learning, expectations) to actively engage and introduce students to your course?
  - How does this principle align to your teaching values/beliefs?
  - How does the principle link to the equity-minded practice and the syllabus component you selected?
- What activity would allow you to actively engage and introduce students to the essence of your course in a meaningful way?

SALT HSI

UTRGV Instructors, did you know you can receive feedback on your teaching practices from trained Student Teaching Consultants?

What can you submit for feedback?

- COURSE SYLLABUS
- ASSIGNMENTS OR PROJECT EXPECTATIONS
- FEEDBACK AND/OR ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES
- TEACHING PHILOSOPHY STATEMENTS
- OTHER TEACHING DOCUMENTS

UTRGV SaLT HSI also offers mid-semester reflection student focus groups, one-on-one conversations, and semester long student-faculty partnerships

VISIT THE SALT HSI WEBSITE FOR MORE DETAILS

https://rb.gy/kaibj1

The University of Texas
RioGrandeValley
Center for Teaching Excellence

- **Promote** authentic collaborations between faculty and students
- **Diversify** educational environments
- **Foster** inclusive and equitable pedagogies
- **Build** students' ownership in learning
- **Empower** students' voices in self-advocacy and agency

[Learn more about SaLT HIS Here](#)

Student Consultant Feedback Request Form

If you are interested in receiving feedback on a teaching document or your course syllabi, please complete a Student Consultant Feedback Request Form.

[Student Consultant Feedback Request Form](#)
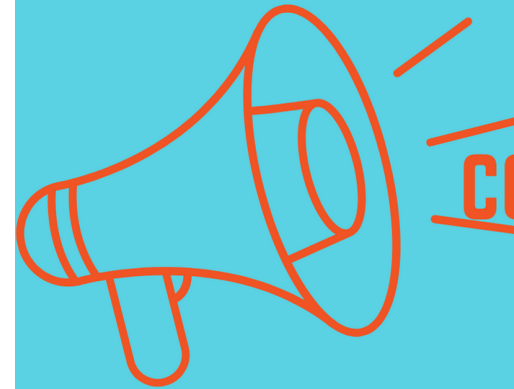
student partners start their Fall work on September 1st.

CTE Teaching Conversation Proposal

[Click here to submit your teaching conversation proposal](#)

BE A PART OF SOMETHING BIG!

INTERESTED IN FACILITATING A TEACHING CONVERSATION

The Center for Teaching Excellence offers monthly teaching conversations on teaching and learning practices where participants reflect on diverse teaching and learning strategies and engage in conversations with fellow peers.

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Thank you!