

Make It Sizzle: Designing a Dynamic, Memorable, Learner-Center Course

Coming up with Great Ideas for a Course

1. *Think outside the box.*

Build on a departmental strength, fill a gap in the curriculum, or open up a fresh topic or issue.

2. *Innovate.*

Consider ways to make your course distinctive pedagogically.

3. *Use the city as a learning laboratory.*

Ask how you can New York city's resources to enhance your course.

Don't Simply List Topics

Consider alternate ways of approaching your course's subject matter. These might include:

- **A document-based approach** that concentrates on "primary source" texts.
- **An inquiry approach** that emphasizes investigation and problem solving.
- **An interdisciplinary approach** that looks at how a topic or issue is addressed by various disciplines.
- **A transnational approach** that offers comparative perspectives on a topic or issue.

Designing a Dynamic, Coherent, Memorable Course

Step 1: Identify your Learning Objectives

Avoid the coverage trap: Don't overwhelm your students with content. Ask what you want to take away from your course. This will, of course, involve content knowledge, but also skills, conceptual frameworks, and disciplinary values or habits of mind.

Step 2: Consider How You Will Motivate Students

Ask what activities will engage your students and best prepare them for your assessments. These might include discussion, lab activities, inquiry and problem solving activities, small group work, and writing exercises.

Step 3: Ask How You Might Best Assess Student Learning

How will you determine whether students have fulfilled your objectives? Consider various approaches: Exams, quizzes, writing assignments, presentations, and projects. But don't overwhelm yourself!



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To arrange a one-on-one consultation, contact:

Steven Mintz
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Step 4: Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Examine how others have taught the subject. Look online. Peruse syllabi, reading lists, assignments, handouts, and examines. Ask yourself why the instructor organized the course in a particular way—and how you might do this differently. Don't simply copy another course: Innovate!

Creating a Learner-Centered Syllabus

An effective syllabus:

- Offers tangible evidence that you have thought seriously about the course's objectives, content, and organization.
- Dramatically reduces the amount of work that you have to do when you actually teach the course.
- Is a contract with your students that articulates the class's conceptual framework, its content and scope, and your course policies, requirements, and assessment techniques.

A learning centered syllabus provides:

- A concise description of the course.
- Weights given to various assignments and exams.
- Policies regarding attendance, grading, late assignments and make-up exams, accommodation for students with disabilities, classroom behavior, and academic dishonesty.

A well-planned syllabus is well worth the time required to prepare it.

What You Need to Include in Your Syllabus:

1. **Basic course information:** The course number, title, and semester taught
2. **Contact information:** office address, office hours, office phone, email address, course web page, class hours and location)
3. **The course description**
4. **Course objectives**
5. **Required and recommended readings**
6. **Course requirements**
7. **Grading policies**, including the percentage weight assigned to each requirement
8. **Other course policies:** Attendance, participation, missed exams, late assignments, academic dishonesty
9. **Calendar of course topics, readings, and assignments**

Optional:

- Succinct summaries of the topics, themes, and issues you will cover in each session or week.
- Suggestions for success; study guides and handouts; available support services

Creating a Cutting Edge Course

Step 1 Make every course component intentional

- Identify the themes and issues you will address
- Let your learning objectives guide your lectures, assignments, and exams.
- Make sure that each class session has a coherent theme or purpose.

Identify the course's learning outcomes, the knowledge and skills that you want the students to acquire. Your goals should involve both lower order and higher order thinking skills (as well as research, writing, and presentation skills).

- Lower order thinking skills involve knowledge and comprehension
- Higher order thinking skills involve analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application

Set goals with concrete, measurable outcomes. Phrase your goals in terms as "Students will be able to..." Use active verbs that signal higher order thinking skills: analyze, interpret, evaluate

Step 2: Give students a conceptual framework on which to hang the course's major ideas, information, and methods.

Ask yourself: What are the unifying principles, themes, theories, logic, and assumptions that underlie the course?

Step 3: Develop a timeline.

Create a calendar of topics and readings. Arrange the sessions logically. A history or literature course might be organized chronologically, but other courses might follow a different logic:

- Micro to Macro or Macro to Micro: Begin with a theory or phenomenon and then at a case study, or vice versa
- Distal to Proximal or Proximal to Distal: Describe a contemporary problem and then look at the problem's origins, or vice versa.

Step 4: Spell out the questions and topics that you will address in each class.

Step 5: Adopt a student-centered, goal-centered, rather than a teacher-centered, approach.

A teacher-centered approach exposes students to what you know. A student-focused approach emphasizes developing the skills and habits of mind characteristic of your discipline.

Identify activities that support your learning goals. I urge you to consider incorporating active forms of learning into your class. These might include:

- Discussion
- Case Studies
- Film Clips and Visual Aids to Prompt Discussion
- Role playing
- Problem Solving Exercises
- Student Reports
- Small Group Activities

Step 6: Take advantage of new technologies.

Incorporate simulations, demonstrations, and audio-visual materials in your class.

Step 7: Establish your course policies.

Is attendance required? How will you handle late work or missed tests? Will there be extra-credit opportunities?

Step 8: Consider how you will evaluate student learning.

Assess students in multiple ways. In addition to quizzes, exams, and papers, you might consider some other activities:

- **Real-time assessment:** A growing number of large classes use “clickers” to assess student comprehension.. An alternative is the ConcepTest, a series of questions presented during class with multiple possible answers.
- **Minute papers:** A concise response to a problem that the instructor poses in class.
- Oral presentations.
- **Small group projects**

Step 9: Develop a Grading Rubric

Consider providing your students with a grading rubric, written guidelines on how their work will be evaluated. Each student's grade should be based on criteria that you communicate orally and in writing. For a research paper, you might consider a rubric along the following lines:

1. The Clarity, Strength, and Development of the Essay's Argument

- Is the argument clearly and compellingly stated?
- Is the analysis original and sophisticated?
- Is the argument well substantiated?
- Is the argument well developed?

2. The Use and Interpretation of Evidence

- How accurate and thorough is the student's research?
- Is the evidence sufficient to support the essay's argument and is it accurately interpreted?

3. The Application of Course Lectures and Readings

- Does the essay demonstrate a solid command of the course's themes and readings?
- Does the essay accurately define and use key course concepts?
- Does the essay situate its argument within a broader disciplinary context?

4. The Quality of the Writing

- Clarity of expression
- Persuasiveness of the argumentation
- Whether the essay's structure is clear and logical

5. *Organization and Mechanics*

- Clear organization: introduction, transition sentences to connect major ideas, and conclusion
- Proper grammar and punctuation, accurate word choice, and correct spelling
- Use and integration of quotations
- Proper citation of scholarly ideas

Remember to give students frequent, timely feedback on their learning.