



# Ensure Students Are Learning:

## Centering Equity-Mindedness in Syllabus Construction

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## What is an Equity-Minded Syllabus?

The course syllabus is considered “an essential document in academic life” (Center for Urban Education, 2017). It is a guide for the course and a contract between instructors and students that dictates how students are evaluated. An equity-minded syllabus is developed with an intentional focus on, and a commitment to, being equitable not only in its design but also in its efforts to foster equitable learning outcomes. Moreover, an equity-minded syllabus is culturally responsive and inclusive, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy, which consists of teaching in a way that centers multiethnic cultural frames of reference (Gay, 2000). As a result, the classroom instruction outlined in an equity-conscious syllabus is informed and guided by teaching and learning practices that recognize, respect, and utilize the diverse lived experiences and cultural and linguistic knowledge of students. Equity-minded syllabi are also tacitly race-conscious and hyper-aware of the harm that can be, and often is, inflicted on students of color by race-neutral classroom policies and practices; consequently, those developing an equity-minded syllabus intentionally strive to address or eliminate these elements in their design.

## Why an Equity-Minded Syllabus?

Designing an equity-minded syllabus is a great opportunity for instructors to foster and promote racial equity and equity-minded practices. The process of developing an equity-minded syllabus not only allows but requires instructors to be introspective and self-reflective around their own teaching practices and course content for their effects on students—especially racially/ethnically minoritized students—and students’ learning outcomes. This type of inquiry and self-assessment by instructors should result in actionable changes in strategies, practices, policies, and course content that are more equitable.

As the Center for Urban Education (2017) points out, an equity-minded syllabus is one that strives to “demystify the implicit norms and ambiguous processes that characterize college such as how to be a ‘successful’ student” (p.3). Going through the process of developing an equity-minded syllabus is

a chance for instructors to pay specific attention to embedding equity into all of the various elements of the syllabus as well as the course and classroom more generally. It is an opportunity for instructors to evaluate and establish the goals of the course, the norms and rules of the classroom, expectations for students, how students are evaluated, and any supports or assistance offered for the course—and whether these elements are equity driven.

A well-designed equity-minded syllabus elevates the use of culturally responsive course content that is relevant to students’ lived experiences, such as readings, activities, and assignments that draw on students’ experiences and cultural and community knowledge, in efforts to foster equitable learning opportunities for all students, but especially marginalized and minoritized students. Similarly, an equity-minded syllabus pays specific attention to ensuring that the course objectives are well aligned with how students are evaluated and allows for various types of assessment of student learning. This means that course objectives are clear and unambiguous and appeal to a variety of students and learning styles. Additionally, assessment measures to evaluate student learning are flexible and diverse (as opposed to singular and normative) and ensure that the knowledge and skills being taught in the course are aligned with the course objectives and student learning outcomes.

## Developing an Equity-Minded and Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Syllabus

Developing an equity-minded syllabus is a real opportunity for instructors to ensure that their syllabus and classroom welcomes all students, validates students’ knowledge and experiences, and promotes a sense of belonging (for marginalized students especially) by including their experiences in course content and deconstructing white students and their experiences as the norm (Center for Urban Education, 2017). Developing an equity-minded syllabus requires instructors to consider how to ensure that it is also culturally responsive and inclusive.



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Equity-minded and culturally responsive and inclusive syllabi pay particular attention to student identities, course content and its relevance, pedagogy, values, and climate (Brantmeier, Broscheid, & Moore, 2017). This requires instructors to be intentionally cognizant and respectful of the different racial/ethnic, language, first-generation college status, ability/disability, and sexual orientation identities of students taking the course; the perspectives and viewpoints represented in the course content as well as the relevance of the course content to students' lived experiences and realities; that their teaching practices are varied and diverse (i.e., lecture, group work, debate, service learning, etc.) and that the values they are imparting do not simply perpetuate dominant norms and values; and that the course fosters a climate that allows for different perspectives and positions and is a space for visible and invisible minoritized students (Brantmeier, Broscheid, & Moore, 2017).

Ultimately, not only should the course syllabus be equity-minded and culturally inclusive, but instructors must strive to ensure that the classroom more broadly is as well. This begins with instructors engaging in the work to identify their own assumptions and biases about students and the world, as well as recognizing how their own positionality impacts their pedagogy—what they teach, how they teach, the resources they utilize, and their interactions with students, especially racially and ethnically minoritized students.

## Course Planning

Even though we cannot select a one-size-fits-all formula for creating an equitable classroom environment, there are philosophies and instructional design decisions that can aid instructors in fostering spaces in which students feel comfortable enough to be heard and seen, as well as environments where students' knowledges are valued and incorporated into learning experiences for the benefit of the collective. In order to engage students within their respective fields of study, instructors must have a foresight that allows them to reflect upon numerous variables impacting the creation of a classroom centering equity-mindedness.

At the outset, instructors should stay mindful of their own epistemological knowledge claims as well as how these assumptions may complement or diverge from funds of knowledge possessed by their students. Epistemology is described as “beliefs how people know what they know, including assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the process of coming to know” (Clayton, 2007); therefore, educators should reflect on questions such as “Where does valid knowledge come from?” and “How certain can knowledge be?” Making space for students' ways of knowing and unique interpretations is essential for crafting an organic classroom environment that is rich in discovery and growth for both student and instructor. The instructional strategies we decide upon reflect not only how we deliver information to our students, but also how we expect our students to interact with said information and the intended result(s) of these instructional choices.

A reflective and continuous accounting of our relationship to students' diverse knowledges (and the broader social milieu within which we are all embedded) is intimately tied to the content we bring into the course curriculum. When we strive for representation of diverse student experiences and epistemologies, we will be intentional in choosing course content that includes our students—especially those from minoritized and underrepresented backgrounds. Moreover, it is important to avoid essentializing the experiences of minoritized student groups. Even though “many groups share in the subordinate social status and selective discrimination that 'minorities' often implies, each cultural group has its own history, values, and customs” (p. 53). Imel (1995) posits that these differences “must be considered in choosing resources and learning activities. It is a mistake, for example, to assume that general information on women also applies to women of color” (p. 1).

Additionally, two important questions we must consider as we examine inclusivity within our syllabi ask “inclusive of whom?” and “in what context(s)?” (Tisdell, 1995, p. 3). For example, instructors must interrogate issues of accessibility, ensuring that videos shown in class (or embedded within an online environment) are accompanied by subtitles.



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Moreover, Tisdell (1995) asks that we examine inclusivity at three levels to manifest equity-minded classrooms that (1) "reflect the diversity of those present in the learning activity itself in the curriculum and pedagogical/andragogical style; (2) attend to the wider and immediate institutional contexts in which the participants work and live; and (3) in some way reflect the changing needs of an increasingly diverse society" (p. 4).

Similarly, Saunders and Kardia (2011) stress the importance of student/instructor interactions and how these interactions are influenced by instructors' "prior assumptions and awareness of potential multicultural issues in classroom situations; planning of class sessions, including the ways students are grouped for learning; knowledge about the diverse backgrounds of students; and decisions, comments, and behaviors during the process of teaching" (p. 1). Therefore, instructors must stay vigilant in engaging in self-appraisal when attempting to craft courses centered in equity-mindedness.

## Conclusion

Advancing equity-minded instructional practices calls for faculty to utilize culturally relevant course content. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* to describe intentionally designed learning practices that foster academic excellence while developing within students a critical orientation toward social inequalities that affect their daily lives. Culturally relevant practices (or later referred to as *culturally sustaining practices*, Ladson-Billings, 2014) account for the "multiplicities of identities" within the classroom, addressing interrelationships among both privileged and penalized identities (p. 82). For example, when introducing founding thinkers of a discipline within an introductory course, educators should account for historically situated, institutionalized barriers (e.g., racism) that have vaulted ideas advanced by white men while stymieing People of Color in a) accessing requisite training in various fields of study and b) being recognized for their scholarly contributions.



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