Essay: Teaching Adult Students: Creating a Syllabus

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Designing a syllabus might be difficult for some, but it was an easy process for me. I had three main foci in mind during the design process: the name of the course, an idea of what texts to use that would support the course, and the intended audience. The course is in the political science category, and it's an international relations and government course. It will be at a Master's degree level and designed to teach adult students. The course will educate students on the economy, human securities, and the difference between rich and poor countries across the Middle East and North Africa. This essay will address the teaching of adults, and some of the mechanics will be addressed in the areas of assigning course grades based on students' performance, paying close attention to students' level of critical thinking, and keeping students engaged and motivated.

Conflict-Human Disorders-and Economic Outlook in the Middle East and North Africa is a 500 level graduate course that can be taught both as a real-time or an online format. This course affords the necessary theoretical foundation and practical skills for understanding conflicts, human disorders, and the economic outlook across the Middle East and North Africa. Students will learn about the economic imbalance, competency through applications and examples of international relations, and nations' inequalities. This course will enhance awareness of the Middle East and North Africa's problems, analyses, solutions, and remediation. Students will also understand the differences between prosperity and poverty among nations and why nations fail despite having natural wealth like oil, gold, bauxite, and other minerals.

This course was developed based solely on my imagination (see Appendix). If this course was being offered, I would register and take the class because it would offer a tremendous amount of knowledge in the areas of modern Middle Eastern and North African democracy, economic challenges, and the state of affairs within those governments. This course was developed with a specific goal in mind: critical thinking. Critical thinking is the key to any advanced course. After creating the topic, I then had to think of the reading materials that would make this course a success. I came up with four reading texts that will give examples of governments and their political landscape, economic outlook, democratic activities among their citizens, and the inequalities of nations and why they fail. Most instructors and, even, authors of printed books have their own way of designing syllabi. For example, in 'Theoretical Model for Designing Online Education Support of Lifelong Learning' (Tomei, 2010, p. 31), Tomei designed his syllabus by analyzing, designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating. I designed mine by using four key points: designing the topic, analyzing the co-existence between the topic and reading materials to ensure the entire syllabus can be supported with text and its topics, evaluating the outcome of the entire syllabus and the text to ensure student learning can be achieved at the end of the quarter, and, finally, implementing the entire syllabus. I had no need for development because implementation took its place (p. 31).

The next key area of designing a syllabus is calculating the weeks in a quarter to match the topics and the chapters of each text. In session seven, for example, the reading materials consist of four books, two of which have reading assignments of two chapters per text, (six chapters total for this week). Each text has the topics for discussions on politics, democracy, economy, and poverty of nations. Each topic for each session is designed for both large and small group discussions and presentations. Tomei (2010) states that "teachers focus on the learning goals" when designing a syllabus, and that is what I focused on. He also writes that "The assessment tasks created in the [syllabus] ensure[s]…students develop and [understand]" (Tomei, 2010, p. 32) critical thinking skills. I chose texts as "instructional materials of choice for the traditional learner" (p. 38) as a way to ensure students think critically. There are, however, other media formats to ensure learning: YouTube, DVDs, CDs, and more.

The next important process for teaching adults, other than text material selections and reading

assignments, is the course grade. Before assigning a grade, the instructors must evaluate their students' learning. The learning assessment that I created is divided into five categories: homework assignments, mid-term research paper, a final research assignment, individual student presentations, and an instructor's evaluation of students. All categories are assigned points. Assigning grades to each student in a classroom is a must. According to Walvoord and Anderson (2010), "grading infuses everything that happens in the classroom. It needs to be acknowledged and managed from the first moment that an instructor begins planning a class" (2010, p. 1). Simply assigning course assignments a grade of an "A" or "B" should not be the only means of teaching. Instructors need to interact with their students, as well as be a part of the classroom's discussions. They also need to challenge their students in order to get them thinking critically, not only in the course, but in life. Accomplishing the goal to get students to think critically, "grading encompasses tailoring the [course assignments] to the learning goals of the course" (p. 1). Cohan and Honigsfeld (2013) also support the idea about interacting with students as a way to get them to think critically. The authors state that instructors 'cannot expect [students] to become excited about learning if we are not excited about teaching' (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2013, p. 1).

Each author, as mentioned above, has his/her own way of designing his/her syllabus in the area of grading. Walvoord and Johnson (2010) state that it would be a waste of time if an instructor did not first plan his/her grading system (p. 7). I would have to disagree. I organized my syllabus by first matching the reading materials to the subject title. Placing my grading procedures to match the assignments was done following the reading assignments. I do agree with the above authors when they mentioned the differences in how instructors should present the course to their students, how the course would be taught, and their teaching strategies. For example, the authors recommended that rather than begin with, "I must cover. . . .," the instructor [would instead begin] with, "I want my students to learn to. . . ." (p.7).

As a student in the college of The School for New Learning, I have come to develop and appreciate the concepts of research and critical thinking over multiple choice and true and false exam questions. I strongly believe students learn more from research over exams. In research, students will have the opportunity to think critically, but in exams, some students will be more focused on memorization, and at the end of that exam those students might be so stressed-out from studying text- book materials, retaining what they have learned might be disregarded. Taking multiple choice exams, in some cases, does not address the goal as an instructor nor does it do much good for students. Research would more "facilitate the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that you [as an instructor] most want [your] students to learn and retain" (Walvoord & Johnson, 2010, p. 9).

A few ways to keep students engaged are by keeping up to date with new materials, the use of various technologies, student interactions, the use of their prior knowledge and experience, and more. Students' prior knowledge, for example, can be used in the classroom because "they have considerable experience of the process of acquiring knowledge and skills and putting it to practical use, usually as the result of day-to-day problem solving' of problems and situations" (Hayes, 2006, p. 71, 4). Those adults are also from different generations and cultural backgrounds and acquired their education from different countries. "As a result, their cultures and previous experiences of education' would diversify the classroom" (p. 4).

Getting Students to Learn and Be Motivated

It's not always possible to get students to learn and be motivated in the classroom. There are times when students come into the class at the beginning of the quarter with one mentality—"All I need is at least a 'C' and I'll be okay,"-while others may be excited about the course. Professor Tyrone Hill wrote about an experience of his in *How Learning Works* (2010) in which he stated he had received the opportunity to teach a course that he loved and was of great interest to him. He invested a large amount of time into creating the syllabus. The majority of the reading was about philosophy, including a research project based on materials about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He "thought [the] students would be excited by the topic and would appreciate reading some of the classic works" (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 66), but he was wrong. His students had no interest in the readings, nor did they participate in the classroom discussions. The students' research projects were even a

disappointment (p. 66). While I created the course syllabus for Conflict-Human Disorders-And Economic Outlook in the Middle East and North Africa, I could suffer the same fate as Professor Hill. I invested a lot of energy into creating the syllabus. I am also passionate about the course, the reading materials, and research topics assigned. Some prospective students, however, may not feel or have the same passion as I do. The best expression that can describe Professor Hill's experience is that students have their own goals. This example does not mean that all or a majority of students have no interest in their classes. A student studying criminal justice might be more dedicated to the courses being offered in his field of study compared to general courses like philosophy and biology. According to Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman (2010), "a dedicated…student may do as little as possible in [a] course if he does not see how the knowledge and perspectives from Continental Philosophy apply to his broader intellectual and professional growth and development" (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 73).

Students do not always have the same goal and passion for a subject as their instructor. I have not shared the same passion for some courses as my professors did. I took a course two quarters ago, and while I was taking the course, and also today, I have not been able to recall the name of the course even when asked the name of it. I tried to do the best I could, although I had no interest in the course. By my own personal experience of not having any interest in a course, and, on the other hand, creating a course matching the reading materials to the title, I understand Professor Hill's experience as well as some of his students' actions (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 72).

Controversial Discussions

Discussing controversial topics in the classrooms can be distracting and uncomfortable and can cause confusion. In my past experience at DePaul University, I was fortunate to have not seen much of any problems in the classroom when it came to discussing uncomfortable topics. There are professors in various locations around the United States who experienced problems in the classroom because controversial topics have gotten out of hand. Professor Leandro Battaglia wrote about his experience in *How Learning Works* (2010). In his economics class, the discussion was "about the cost of illegal immigration to the U.S. economy" (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 153). One of his students became boisterous about immigrants being in the U.S. Apparently, this particular student had a habit of bringing up racial comments in the past. Another student interjected, stating "immigrants should be arrested and deported" (p. 153). Sitting quietly in the classroom were three Mexican students who were in the U.S. illegally. The entire classroom erupted in an argument back and forth about entitlement.   The professor eventually regained control of the classroom after strenuous efforts (p. 154).

The above example shows how a classroom can without warning go in a different direction other than what the professor had in mind during classroom discussions. How can instructors better manage the classrooms when discussing emotional topics? Some instructors, in my past experience at the beginning of the course, spoke specifically on the topic of emotions. As adults, emotions should be controlled, and as students, they should allow respect for each other to be the main focus. According to Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, students with difficulties controlling their emotions in the classroom could be the result of the students not yet learning to channel their emotions productively, even in adulthood. A better option for instructors is to better prepare educational strategies so emotional problems can be easily noticed (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 157).

In conclusion, I do not see educating adults as a difficult process because when they join the classroom, they already have a variety of world experiences. Those experiences can include personal experiences, work, community, and more. Some instructors, when they develop their syllabus, especially at a graduate level, would expect their students to already know or have some sort of knowledge in the area of the syllabus. Their main concern usually is keeping their students motivated and paying close attention to their critical thinking skills during classroom discussions, presentations, and research papers. During the design process of Conflict-Human Disorders-and-Economic Outlook in the Middle East and North Africa, I focused on the name of the course, an idea of what texts to use that would support the name of the course, and the audience it would be intended for as a way to advance students critical

thinking skills.

References

Cohan, A., & Honigsfeld, A. (2013). *Breaking the mold of education: Innovative and successful practices for student engagement, empowerment and motivation*. New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Hayes, A. (2006). *Teaching adults: The essential FE toolkit series*. New York, Continuum International Publishing Group.

Walvoord, B., & Anderson, V. (2010). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment in college.* (Second Edition). San Francisco, CA, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Tomei, L. (2010). *A theoretical model for designing online education in support of lifelong learning.* Robert Morris University, USA, IGI Global.

Appendix

University	Political Science	Graduate Program	
Conflicts-Human Disorders – And Economic Outlook In The Middle East And North Africa			

Course Number –   500
Course Name -   Conflicts-Human Disorders-And Economic Outlook In The Middle East And North Africa

Semester 2014 –   Evenings – Campus.
Credit Hours -   4
Instructor -   Dwayne Small, BA, MA
Email -   Georgetown_guyana@yahoo.com
Phone -   773 – 555 – 5555
Appointments -   By phone or office Hours (2pm – 4pm)

Instructor's Biography - Located at the end of the Syllabus.

Course Description –
This course affords the necessary theoretical foundation and practical skills for understanding conflicts, human insecurities, and economic outlook across the Middle East (ME) and North Africa (NA). Students learn economic inequalities competency through applications and examples on international relations and nations inequalities.

This course examines outcome oriented conflicts, human insecurities, and economic outlook in the Middle East and North Africa as a means for enhancing awareness of the ME and NA's problems, analysis, solution, and remediation. Students will work towards understanding the differences between prosperity and poverty among nations, why nations fail despite abundant of natural resources. Students will also be provided with opportunities to explore and practice theoretical solutions and remediation of conflicts. This will be done through discussions, in- and out-of-class assignments, a mid-term, a final, and presentation projects.

Learning Strategies and Learning resources - Several learning strategies will be included in this course:
- Readings: you are expected to complete each reading assignment (books/articles/problems).
- Lectures: mini lectures at each class sessions.
- Discussion and debates: Individual's insights from the readings will be discussed in both small and large groups.
- Collaborative Learning: you will participate in small group exercises with others. Applying collaborative learning skills (analyze, critical thinking, communication, group dynamic skills, etc.).
- Homework: analyzing chapter reading assignments and discussions and writing assignments.
- Midterm Research Paper: the midterm paper will integrate concepts from the homework, class discussions in support of the learning outcome.
- Final Research Paper: you will choose your own topic (integrate course concepts, homework, and class discussions).
- Individual Student Presentation: you will design and present before the class. Topic presented will be that of final research paper. It will be reviewed and graded by instructed.

Learning Assignments and Points:
- Seven (7) homework assignments, (10points) each.
  The assignments ask students to analyze the readings and respond to questions given at the end of each class sessions (7 x 10 points = 70 points total).
- Mid-term research paper related to learning outcomes, homework, and discussions will be used as evidence to complete the project (15 points).
- Final research paper related to learning outcome (45 points).
  Individual student presentation on a topic of own choosing presented to the class (20 points).
- Instructor evaluation of student (20 points). Evaluation will be based on class attendance, class participation, and group participation.

Total points = 170

- Please see the attendance section of the syllabus for additional information regarding missed classes.
- Timeline is extremely important when submitting assignments. Assignments submitted late will automatically lose a letter grade; assignments turned in later than three days will receive zero points.

Learning Resources
Required Texts for this Class:
- Gasiorowski, Mark. *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa.* (SEVENTH EDITION), Westview Press, Publications, 2014. This book includes information regarding the Middle East and North Africa's governments and political land scape. An overview of each country and its historical background is also included.
- Pelzman, Joseph. *The Economics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).* New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing Co. 2012. This book provides an over view of the Middle East and North Africa's economic realities of the regions.
- Feiler, Bruce. *Generation Freedom: The Middle East uprisings and the remaking of the*

modern world.   (FIRST EDITION), New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011.   This material looks back at the historic events that took place across the Middle East and North Africa, including the reshaping of the regions during and after the Arab Spring.
- Acemoglu, Daron and Robinson A., James. *Why Nations Fail.* New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2012. This book asks its readers to determine what the causes of poverty in a nation, assessing blame: man made politics or nature?

Assessment of Student Learning and Marks
At the conclusion of this course, students should be able to validate the following:
- Increase awareness and knowledge of the governments, human securities, economies, and political outlook of various countries across the Middle East and North Africa.
- Increase awareness of affective and Ineffective theories as to why developing countries remain economically stagnant and rich countries remain successful.

Development in cultural and economic intelligence, professional skills to effectively understand, manage, and communicate the conflicts, human disorders, and the economic outlook in the Middle East and North Africa.