Using Syllabi in Transition Classes to Build College Knowledge

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field that are designed to promote the successful transition of adult basic education students to postsecondary education.

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Program Context
The Bridge Program is part of the Community Learning Center (CLC), which serves adults from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and surrounding communities. The CLC offers a full range of educational services, including GED, adult diploma, ESOL, citizenship, family literacy, and for the homeless programs. The CLC, a program of the city of Cambridge’s Department of Human Services Programs, serves over 1,000 people annually. The Bridge Program, begun in 1997, is a one-year college preparation program for adults who have a GED or high school diploma but who know they need review before they will be able to succeed in college.

Rationale and Background of the Practice
Why did you institute the practice?
The Community Learning Center has a Student Advisory Committee that meets with the director to provide input on the program. Some members of the committee have asked for greater clarity on the content and sequencing of class levels. We are gradually developing better tools for teachers at all class levels to use with students for that purpose.

In our transition to college Bridge program, we recognized the value of a syllabus on several levels. Since the students are all preparing for college, where they will encounter syllabi in all classes, we wanted them to learn how to read and use a syllabus. This document also reinforces our program goal of helping students take a well-organized approach to their studies. It gives students a clear statement of the learning objectives of the course and their responsibilities as students. They can plan multi-step assignments over time. They learn to be self-paced, as they will need to be in college. They learn about the concept of office hours, and the expectation that they will take initiative to meet with the instructor.

When we first introduced syllabi into our courses, most of our students had never seen one before. The introduction of a syllabus into our classes is a form of document literacy, working with a text that students need to be fluent with in order to succeed in college.

For the instructor, a syllabus functions as an instructional template. Because a syllabus is something of a cross between an over-arching class curriculum and a micro-lesson plan, it keeps classroom planning on track, allowing teachers to think about how we’re delivering information and facilitating learning rather than on what it is we’re supposed to covering. Ideally, with the flow and sequence of the class laid out for the teacher (by the teacher) well in advance of having to teach it, we’re free during the course of the semester to focus on the best way to impart the content and skills necessary for students to succeed in the transitional classroom.

What information or research did you draw on in choosing this practice?
The Bridge Coordinator and instructors had experience in higher education settings as both students and teachers, so we brought that experience to this situation. We started by asking colleagues from community colleges and 4-year colleges to share samples of their syllabi. We were also able to access some syllabi from community colleges in other states by searching online. We used these models to create our own syllabi. The major modification that we made was the elimination of grading criteria since we do not give grades in Bridge. However, we did include the requirements for students to complete a portfolio.

Adult Literacy Education reading expert, John Strucker in his article, "More Curriculum Structure: A Response to Turbulence," suggests that adult literacy programs could create more transparency for students and provide more support for their learning endeavors with the institution of syllabi: "With regard to the use of syllabi, why shouldn't adult basic education more closely resemble the "other," more privileged adult education; postsecondary education? When our students reach community college they will find that most teachers employ a syllabus and attempt to stick to it regardless of fluctuations in attendance and enrollment."

When and how did the practice begin? How has it evolved?
The Bridge Program includes reading, study skills, writing, math, and computer skills. We began using a formal syllabus in the writing class in school year 2007-08. We added one in reading/study skills in 2008-09. The current syllabus integrates reading, writing, and study skills. The syllabus content and format have been modified each term to better meet students’ needs. For example, the first reading syllabus was revised several times, to make it less complex, especially graphically, as extra visual information seemed to add unnecessarily to the students’ ability to understand the purpose and use of
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**Description of the Practice**

**How do you implement the practice?**

Students receive a syllabus on day one of their classes in Bridge Reading/Writing. Instructors spend time describing the purpose of the syllabus as well as reading and making sense of the various components within the syllabus: the course description, learning objectives, texts/materials and course assignments. Course assignments are further broken up into journal, short writing assignments, research paper, portfolio and weekly homework expectations for the Reading/Writing Course. Emphasis is placed on the students’ responsibility for completing homework assignments in a timely manner and for completing work after missed classes. Appropriately, the Bridge Program is more product-oriented than our general adult literacy classes. An emphasis on products, all of which are stated in the syllabus, prepares students for the demands of a college classroom.

In addition, we refer to the syllabus at the beginning of each class, as a way of making sure everyone is clear on what we’ll be doing that evening, what homework is due, and what homework will be due the following class. Also, we look ahead to discuss long-term planning for the big assignments, such as the research project: on which weeks are components of these assignments mentioned, and what needs to be done toward their completion on these weeks? Ideally, students can learn from this modeling how to plan for longer term projects in their college classes.

**Download**

- CLC Writing Syllabus from Spring 2009
- CLC Reading-Writing Syllabus from Spring 2010
- Bridge Syllabus Quiz

**What steps would a program or practitioner need to follow to replicate the practice?**

Staff would have to be willing and able to dedicate a period of preparation time before teaching the course to identify the components of a basic college syllabus and then adapt those components to meet the needs of their transitional class.

There are many examples of college syllabi online as well as advice to instructors about how to best go about developing new syllabi. We’ve also included our syllabus as an example. We’ve learned from one another and of course from experimenting with our syllabi. It’s also useful to revisit your prior syllabus and to see what worked and didn’t—what could be modified, edited and clarified within the document.

Given that all instructors need to prepare and plan course outlines, general objectives and basic sequencing of activities to meet those objectives, implementing a syllabus does not create additional work overall for practitioners. In fact, it can free practitioners to spend their planning time refining pedagogical issues such as how to best teach materials rather than focusing on what should come next in their teaching sequence.

**What are the staffing and staff skill requirements?**

Instructors should be comfortable with and able to transfer the college culture of transparency, i.e., this is what is due when, and this is why it's due etc. And again, staff need time to create the document since it serves as a very clear and quite detailed course outline. Aspects of the *Integrating Syllabi into Programs Workshop* designed by Deborah Schwartz are a useful tool for instructors wanting to integrate the syllabus format into their curriculum.

**Download**

- Integrating Syllabi document

**Challenges**

One of the biggest challenges, especially in the ABE setting, is the difficulty of planning weeks ahead in a class with such a diversity of skill levels. Once classes have begun and students’ strengths and weak areas become more apparent, changes to the sequence and level of course components must often be made, often in different ways for sub-groups or individuals. The Bridge program straddles the area between the differentiated instruction needed in ABE and college where they will need to make a huge leap in terms of keeping pace in their classes on their own and/or with the help of academic supports they will need to seek out. It can be difficult to balance the need to slow down so all students can stay abreast with the need to maintain a pace similar to what they'll experience in college.

**What have been the advantages and outcomes of this practice?**

Along with accolades from graduates, now attending classes in postsecondary institutions, who talk more generally about the invaluable time management and organizational tools that they’ve gained by participating in Bridge, there is the occasional moment when, if the class is confused, one or two students will pull out the syllabus and say, “Look, it’s here, p.3....” In addition, there is a core group of students who, rather than looking dazed when they start class or an assignment, calmly get out their relevant papers and/or books. There are other factors that contribute to this, but the syllabus definitely helps.

Many Bridge students are empowered by knowing they can look ahead, check current assignments and refresh their memories regarding class discussions, just by looking at the syllabus. And as mentioned earlier, in addition to being an organizing tool (for both students and teacher), the syllabus functions to introduce students to the college culture.
College Knowledge: Students need a broad array of readiness skills and abilities to be successful in postsecondary education and training. True readiness is a set of career, college, academic and personal readiness skills. College knowledge is an important dimension of college readiness. It includes all the informal and formal, implicit and explicit information necessary to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Learning the jargon and understanding the norms of the ‘academic” culture is an important part of this knowledge for all students. Becoming familiar with the form and content of college syllabi builds one’s college knowledge.

See David Conley’s article, Rethinking College Readiness in the New England Journal of Higher Education.

Reference
** From "More Curriculum Structure: A Response to 'Turbulence'” by John Strucker in Focus on Basics, Volume 8, Issue C. November 2006