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Let's Play *Get to Know Your Syllabus*

"I never read the syllabus."

"How long does the essay have to be? Should it be double-spaced?"

"Do you accept late papers?"

"Will absences affect my grade?"

Sound familiar? Hearing these comments from our students can be downright discouraging, but not surprising. Comments like those listed above often confirm a sneaking suspicion that students did not read the syllabus thoroughly, if at all.

How do we get students to read the syllabus? We can post it on our course web page. We can hand copies out in class with an urgent plea or a dire warning to read it. We can walk through the syllabus, reading every detail to them. Either way, with many students the result is the same. However, these strategies teach our students to ask us for course information, rather than modeling how they can and should use the syllabus. Although I always look forward to the start of a new semester, for a time, my syllabus problem began to create some first-day dread for me.

Fortunately, I came up with a strategy that—on day one—gets students talking to one another, introduces them to the course, and teaches them to take responsibility for their learning. What is this strategy? As I tell my students when I introduce this icebreaker, "We're going to play a little game that I like to call, *Get to Know Your Syllabus*."

First: Introductions

Students are nervous on their first day, especially if they are new to college, as most students are in my developmental reading and writing courses. I get that; I don't want to add to student anxiety by having each student speak in front of a classroom of complete strangers, waiting as we go row by row, desk by desk, in the old *tell-us-a-little-about-yourself* tried and true, guaranteed to make you blue, routine.

Instead, it is much easier for students to interact with new classmates in small groups. For example, in a class of 20 students, I form four groups of five by attributing numbers to each student: *one, two, three, four, five . . . one, two, three, four, five . . .* and so on. "You may be just a number to me now," I tell them. "But you won't be for long."

Once the class divides into groups, I ask each student to introduce him or herself to the rest of the group and to share their experience, if any, using a syllabus. Giving students a topic to discuss eases the introduction process and helps moves them past any initial awkwardness. After group introductions, I suggest to students that they should now know whom they are playing against in our game of *Get to Know Your Syllabus*. Now, feeling a little more relaxed and in the comfort of their groups, students are able to introduce themselves to the entire class with no problem.

Reviewing the Syllabus

Next, I distribute the syllabus and, before I ask students to review it, I explain its purpose and provide examples of the types of information within it. If I am teaching a developmental reading course, I use this as a brief introduction to a reading strategy, such as previewing. I then tell students that I do not expect them to memorize the syllabus; however, they should be familiar enough to know when to consult it during the semester and how to find necessary information quickly. Students discover that familiarity with the syllabus and actively using it enhances their success in the course. Finally, I segue to the game by telling students that they are about to experience a brief application of this winning strategy of knowing and using the syllabus.

As if discovering a valuable learning tool in the syllabus isn't enough, I award the winners of the game with a little prize. For example, I may say, "The winners of this game will get to blow off one homework assignment with *impunity*." Speaking in such a way provides a learning detour. I encourage my students to keep vocabulary notebooks, especially in developmental classes. When I ask the class if everyone knows what *impunity* means, I usually find that no one does. I then ask, "Well, how do you know that you want to win that prize?" At that point, I ask a volunteer to look up the definition—I try to limit cell phone use in class, or at least channel it towards good purposes. Then, I ask everyone to make three columns in their notebooks: in the first column, students write the unknown word; in the next, they write the definition; and, finally, they must use the word in a sentence in the last column. This exercise begins the vocabulary list students keep throughout the semester, tracking new words they learn from readings and class discussion.

Time to Play!

To play the game, I first give students 10 minutes to read the syllabus and generate at least 10 questions to pose to the other groups. I explain that even if the game only goes for five rounds, depending on time, students should have more than five questions ready in case another group asks the same or a similar question to what their group was going to ask.

Groups ask questions in a round-robin style: one question per group per round; the first group asks the group to its right a question. The group answering has only 30 seconds to answer correctly. There is a considerable penalty for answering incorrectly, so students pore over the syllabus—even for easy questions—to avoid blurting out just any answer. It is wonderful to see my students reading the syllabus with purpose and enthusiasm as they verify answers.

To keep track of time, you can use whatever you find convenient. However, I find that it adds a certain level of excitement and fun if students can see the seconds ticking away as their classmates look for the answer. I use an online egg timer, **http://e.ggtimer.com/**, which I project on the screen for the entire class to see. The turn ends and passes to the next group when the group answering (1) gives the correct answer, (2) gives an incorrect answer, or, (3) the time runs out. The round is over when each group has asked a question. The game is over at the end of the period. Typically, I use this format in a 50-minute period, but you can always adjust it to fit your needs.

To score the game, I use the following point system:

- A group answers a question correctly: +3 points
- A group answers a question incorrectly: -3 points
- A group fails to give an answer within time: - 1 point

I use bonus questions in the event of a tie or if there are important points in the syllabus that deserve more attention. My students know in advance that I reserve the right to ask bonus questions.

Other than needing to ask the occasional bonus question, I just step back and watch the students. I watch the class work hard—forgetting for the moment that I am there at all—looking for good questions to stump each other, and then flipping back through the syllabus to provide the correct answer to classmates' questions. While the prize of a late homework pass is helpful, apparently, claiming the title of *Get to Know Your Syllabus* champions is immediate and more gratifying.

Listed on "Day One" of my syllabus is *INTRODUCTIONS: To one another; To the course*. I use an icebreaker on the first day to accomplish both introductions. This icebreaker also increases the likelihood that students take on the responsibility to use their syllabus, because they experience the value of doing so in a fun and effective way.

Do you use similar games or strategies to introduce your students to the syllabus? Share those with us in the comment section or on Facebook!

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