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A Personal Approach to Syllabus Design: A Blueprint for Learning in Composition Class

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Abstract

This article explains the thinking behind my English 102 syllabus design and the choices I made to help students become better writers. I recently surveyed a cohort of undergraduate students on what they would like me to include in the syllabus and how I should teach and guide them in the class to meet their needs. Considering most of their ideas and concerns, I designed this syllabus to be more student-friendly by making it more welcoming and accessible to promote active student participation in my classroom. This syllabus focuses on flexibility and a student-centered approach adapting diverse learning styles. This article also discusses why I encouraged language diversity in students' writing, what the insights are behind preparing the assignments, and how the grading mechanisms I follow will provide clarity and fairness to the students. By highlighting creative expression and prioritizing critical thinking over perfect grammar, this research also encourages the various ways people communicate their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and creativity using multimodal technology to reflect modern communication practices as well. The essay is not simply about the syllabus but also my learning process as I developed it to show reflection and growth. The course centers on the interdisciplinary theme of Animal Studies, linking writing to real-world contexts to encourage critical thinking across subjects. By contrasting this approach with more rigid curricula in Nepal, I highlight the value of teacher autonomy and flexible design in supporting student learning. This article contributes to conversations about inclusive and responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: *syllabus design, student-centered pedagogy, critical thinking, teacher autonomy, curriculum reform*

Introduction

The primary focus of this article is on the rationale behind my English 102 syllabus design to demonstrate how a teacher becomes mindful before presenting it to the student. However, before I discuss my ideas on its design, I would like to provide a brief and general background about Nepal's and the US education system. In Nepal, curriculum and syllabus design are highlycentralized. Institutions like the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) and Tribhuvan University (TU) dictate content right from elementary to graduate levels (CDC, 2023; Tribhuvan

University, 2023). While this rigid top-down approach allows for straightforward administrative control and standardize assessment all over that nation along with constituency in what is taught, and how it is taught along with the stable baseline of educational, it strictly limits teachers' ability to adapt to new pedagogical methods, and diverse student needs. This practice sharply contrasts with the U.S. model, where faculty are given substantial autonomy to design flexible, student-centered syllabi that focus on proven methods and thoughtful self-evaluation.

The Centralized System in Nepal

Although this centralized system ensures uniform standards across the country, in practice it often produces outdated, exam-focused syllabi that causes slow updates. Although this centralized system ensures uniform standards across the country, in practice it often produces outdated, exam-focused syllabi that causes slow updates,with major revisions occurring only only once every ten years (Reddit, 2023a; 2023b). To get a sense of how this system feels to those directly affected, I turned to draw on informal discussions from the platforms such as r/NepalSocial and Reddit. These forums provide unique insights from the ground level perspectives of who are really in the battle field of learning, i.e., students whose lived experiences and public perceptions that are often missing from official reports by the CDC and TU. Together, these posts form a kind of archive of public discourse filled with students' frustrated discussions about late examinations, inaccurate results, and bureaucratic delays (Reddit, 2023a; 2023b); this also shows how urgent it is to reform our education system. While anecdotal, this perspective shows how a rigid curriculum design restricts educators by leaving little room for innovation and adapt syllabi to local contexts, ultimately restricting teaching approaches and narrow down the learning opportunities (Edusanjal, 2023; Sharma, 2023).

The U.S. Model of Teacher Autonomy

The U.S. system contrasts sharply with Nepal's centralized model because American education is widely decentralized in terms of the agency and trust provided to the individual teachers. They are granted the authority to design syllabi, make decisions about teaching approaches, and adapt coursework to student needs (Altbach, 2001; Marginson, 2016). Academic freedom is the core principle in U.S. education. Faculty design syllabi that reflect their expertise and responsibilities. They keep pace with local and global knowledge since faculty are designated to add content and even change the evaluation and grading mechanism in the middle of the semester as well (Bok, 2017). This encourages critical thinking, creativity, and student engagement since teachers teach from their expertise, not from a standardized script. For instance, at institutions like the University of Louisville (UofL), faculty are trusted to create syllabi that align with broader course and program goals while also tailoring assignments and assessments to their students' evolving needs. This autonomy is supported by structured professional development that focuses on practical strategies like evidence-based teaching, reflective practice, and accountability that the teacher holds for student learning (Ramírez, 2015). In fact, scholars point out that this approach fits well with the push for learner-centered and flexible curricula (Weimer, 2013). When instructors have ownership over their syllabi, students report higher motivation and perceive instructors as more effective (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Ultimately, providing teachers with this level of

agency fosters innovation, makes education more contextually relevant, and strengthens overall teaching and learning effectiveness.

The stark differences between these two systems of education highlight the need to take a fresh look at how Nepal approaches education. A shift is urgently required in Nepal's education system, moving away from rigid centralization toward approaches that empower teachers, localize curricula, and creating learning experiences that actually feel meaningful to students. The highly centralized approach in Nepal creates a tension between standardization and responsiveness. Although centralization ensures consistency and uniformity across various schools, it often fails to consider the varied social, cultural, and economic realities that students face in different parts of the regions. Hence, it is crucial to understand that - what works in one region may not work at all in another, so the system that tends to treat every "context is" questionable. This issue is not new. Tripathi et al. (2019), also echoed this problem pointing out that top-down policy changes must be matched by "bottom-up shifts" at the level of teaching and learning to truly transform the educational system. They suggest that greater teacher autonomy and localized curriculum design could be the key to making education more relevant and engaging, shifting the focus from "teaching to learning" and from "knowing to doing" (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 140). The U.S. model, where faculty engagement is the "bedrock for the growth and success" of educational initiatives (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 137), offers a valuable insight into how granting educators' greater authority could enhance teaching quality while also giving space for local voices, teacher innovation and context-based learning to flourish at large.

Rationale of my Syllabus English 102

In this article, I aim to share the pedagogical thinking and process that went into designing my English 102 syllabus. My goal is to explain not only the reasoning behind my choices but also how my experiences in the U.S., particularly at the UofL shaped my approach. I want to show how teacher autonomy and responsibility can directly influence syllabus development and how a student-centered design can create a balance between flexibility, creativity, and structure (Young-Jones et al., 2019). By doing so, the syllabus fosters critical thinking and engagement while remaining adaptable to diverse learning needs. Another important objective is to highlight how integrating interdisciplinary content, translingual perspectives, and multimodal composition can strengthen students' writing and research skills. Finally, I hope to suggest how teacher-driven syllabus design, inform curriculum reforms in more centralized educational contexts such as Nepal.

To achieve these objectives, I rely on a qualitative and reflective approach. First, I gathered insights from students through informal interviews and surveys, which helped me understand their needs, preferences, and challenges. Their feedback directly influenced my choices about assignments, teaching strategies, and course materials. Second, I grounded my decisions in pedagogical research, drawing on scholarship in composition studies—such as translingual approaches, rhetorical intertextuality, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), and multimodal composition. These frameworks provided evidence-based guidance for structuring the course and

designing assignments. Finally, I drew on reflective practice, considering my own experiences both as a learner and as an instructor at the UofL. The autonomy and pedagogical strategies I observed there shaped my choices about course themes, classroom practices, and methods of engaging students. Together, these approaches created a syllabus that is not only theoretically informed but also responsive to student voices and adaptable to different educational contexts.

A Thematic Approach to Syllabus Design: Animal Studies

I decided to design my English 102 syllabus on a course theme centered on Animal Studies, thinking that structuring the course around a central idea would help me create clear writing assignment prompts that could be aligned with the course objectives. Of course, teaching writing and research skills does not necessarily require a specific theme, but I thought of theming the course with one central idea to add depth and context and help students connect with the course materials. For this, I have selected DeMello's *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* as the primary introductory textbook for the course because this book is designed for beginner learners. However, not all chapters and articles are relevant for English 102 students, so I have chosen specific topics as needed. The course is planned for three days a week, with two articles covered, followed by a related YouTube video on the third day.

Interdisciplinary Learning and Writing Pedagogy

Based on the course schedule, the interdisciplinary content is carefully structured to guide students through a progressive inquiry. Unit 1 introduces animals in historical and cultural contexts, laying a foundation for Unit 2's exploration of ethical and social issues like factory farming and biomedical testing. Unit 3 builds on students' textual analysis skills to examine human-animal relationships across media, and Unit 4 culminates in applying this knowledge to a regional issue. This progression—from historical context to ethical analysis to practical application—creates a coherent framework for developing critical thinking and writing skills.

Although writing has traditionally been confined to English classrooms, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement challenges this limitation, emphasizing that writing is a vital tool for deep engagement and critical thinking in all disciplines. As a composition teacher, I thought that bringing in an interdisciplinary course on animal studies in writing pedagogy perfectly fits this philosophy. As Gray and Zinsser assert, writing is too important to be left entirely to English teachers, which underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration (Gray, 1988, p. 729; Zinsser, 1988). I believe, this could be the start of a small but important step that can team up with teachers from different subjects by blending content and discipline. In doing so, I hope I can fulfill my role as a facilitator, making writing an essential and transformative practice with richer learning experiences.

Teaching Strategies for My Composition Classroom

In this essay (and in my teaching), I aim to address the key skills needed to write a research paper by focusing on three main aspects: first, a translingual approach; second, rhetorical

intertextuality; and third, multimodal composition. Finally, I have described the methods for developing overall analytical, critical, and ethical thinking skills essential to research writing.

Translingual Approach and Student Identity

Through an exploration of various scholarly articles by Min-Zhan Lu (1994), Tran (2011), Barrett (2014), Devereaux (2014), Smitherman (1999), Horner et al. (2011), Canagarajah (2013), Young (2010), Cox (2014), and Ferris (2009), I have gained valuable insights into the translingual approach and the importance of affirming student identity. These readings have reinforced my commitment to recognizing language diversity as a strength, rather than a weakness, in academic settings. Therefore, my first and foremost emphasis is placed more on clear thinking and writing than on perfect grammar. In the syllabus, I have explicitly stated (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. viii) that ―I am not seeking perfect standard or Edited American English (EAE).‖ I aim to guide the student to think critically and "properly develop their ideas‖ to communicate their thoughts (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. viii). So, I do not penalize my students simply because of language deviations from these norms (such as variations in grammar, spelling, or structure) since they are not necessarily mistakes if they still communicate ideas effectively. I believe it is necessary to understand that "the anxiety produced by being inappropriate simply because the rules of your language do not match those of your teacher" (Barrett, 2014, p. 135). To help reduce such anxiety in my students, I added a playful note in the syllabus, stating that typos will not greatly affect their grades. Specifically, I wrote, "So, typos won't derail your grade train!" to convey the message that grammar errors are minor (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. viii). Regidor (2023), in her article on student trauma, also highlights the importance of not grading technical aspects of writing. She says, "If educators must give feedback on grammar and mechanics, this feedback should be separate from grades" (Regidor, 2023, p. 30). So, I have decided to provide feedback on technical errors but not grade them on these mistakes because I also need to understand that some students may still want feedback on writing mechanics as they might need it for other courses. Even though my course and the field of Rhetoric and Composition do not strictly focus on grading mechanics, I recognize that the shift toward caring less about grammar might take time in other academic fields. Therefore, I made this decision with the understanding that such a transition is a gradual evolution, not something my syllabus can change overnight. Additionally, I have adopted a rather informal tone—using short and simple sentences—particularly in the section on writing assignments, to make it easier for students to follow. This approach aims to create a supportive, less stressful environment where students can engage with the material and develop their skills without the fear of harsh judgment, fostering a less strict teacher image.

Moreover, by acknowledging the richness of knowledge in diverse linguistic backgrounds, I encourage students to incorporate "relevant multilingual terms or phrases" How does it exactly happen? You need to discuss it.) or maybe some ideas or ethics related to animals in the footnotes (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. viii). I believe including such distinct linguistic elements in their writing adds richness to their ideas, so I asked for these elements to ―be presented in a way that makes sense to the reader‖ through footnotes (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. viii). This approach also teaches students to honor the ―power of all language,‖ dismissing inadequate monolingual norms that rigidly enforce the same form, manner, degree, and standards (Horner et al., 2011, p.

305). To balance creativity and linguistic diversity, students need to be careful in their writing. For this reason, I instructed students to "proofread and double-check the final draft," to promote their attention to detail and clarity (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. viii). This approach encourages students to be more mindful of their writing and help them understand that ―deviations from dominant expectations are not necessarily errors,‖ as demonstrated through the practical application of these concepts in the classroom (Horner et al., 2011, p. 305). Moreover, my strategies focus on understanding whether their language choice has a purpose or reflects a misunderstanding. I have not considered their writing wrong just because it is unexpected.

In my course, I encourage them to incorporate both the assigned course readings and their own chosen texts in their writing assignments. As Howard and Jamieson argue, "it is not enough for students to find and correctly cite appropriate and reliable sources, and then simply to reproduce ideas from those sources in list-like presentations of undigested information" (Howard & Jamieson, 2021, p. 396). Instead of merely seeking mechanical correctness, students must be trained to engage in a dialogic relationship with sources, actively participating in the process of meaning-making. To support this, I teach my students to develop robust ―research skills by examining the best and most reliable sources related to human-animal relationships‖ (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. vii). By curating, synthesizing, and meaningfully engaging with these sources, students learn to make purposeful rhetorical choices when communicating with diverse audiences. For this, I personally demonstrate how I select sources based on currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose. I am truly intrigued by the idea of taking sources not just as a collection of "sentence banks" (Howard & Jamieson, 2021, p. 394), but as a bigger part of "ongoing debates" to help us teach writing as a way to participate in knowledge production (Bizup, 2008, p. 81). So, by having students submit reference lists to the teacher before writing, they can develop research questions that arise organically from their exploration of sources. For the final assignments, I have also mentioned that ―Most of these will probably come from your annotated bibliography, but if you think you want to add some new sources as your project progresses‖ (see Appendix: Syllabus, p. xi). This strategy of selecting new sources allows students to see sources not just as citations, but as participants in an ongoing conversation. In the meantime, by looking at their progress in textual analysis, I have a plan to organize a small workshop in collaboration with librarians. The reason I planned to do this after the first major assignment is that they get concrete ideas to be ready to ask about the problems they encountered while doing the first research assignment. To further scaffold this process, I have structured the assignments into smaller tasks—such as Textual Analysis, Bibliography Writing, Argumentative Essay, and a Final Project—in between shorter tasks to engage in Blackboard responses so that students progressively build their rhetorical intertextual skills—because I am impressed by Howard & Jamieson's pedagogical tactics of asking students to write multiple shorter assignments for different audiences, rather than one long paper at the end (Howard & Jamieson, 2021, p. 396). This ensures engaging deeply with the content, while also creating richer, more nuanced arguments.

My syllabus integrates multimodal composition because, in this age of growing technology, some students might be interested in exploring visual presentations incorporating audio and visual elements. This is my first but small step in applying ―multi-writing‖ in the composition classroom. This can break free from traditional academic constraints by moving into a wealth of knowledge that extends a little beyond the confines of libraries and textbooks. I want these students to conduct a ―multi-research‖ approach in unconventional settings, such as ―in the homes of farmers and ranchers‖, and to uncover authentic and fresh ideas that challenge conventional wisdom (Larson, p. 816). I plan to involve them in hands-on activities like visiting farms or zoos, conducting interviews, and assisting them in creating a written report for voice-over to produce a ten to fifteen-minute video for a final project. e.g., students are asked to produce videos related to their topic of interest such as animal rights with voice overs, incorporating arguments and counterarguments. They also include necessary video clips from YouTube or web images and give credit by citing sources to the people's videos and pictures at the bottom to avoid copyright infringement. For this, I provide clear guidelines beforehand orally as well. In these broader implications of research, I also aim to transfer all skills needed for writing. In other words, this approach is helpful even for these students who choose to focus solely on traditional research writing in the future. So, I am not treating it as a one-time task. By embracing this innovative approach, we can foster a generation of critical thinkers who will be equipped to navigate the complexities of the 21stcentury technological world.

I have designed a syllabus with a focus on flexibility and ease of understanding, particularly regarding assignment submission deadlines and grading criteria. Taking ideas from Womack (2017) who suggests using friendly language in syllabi and giving students more choices, like flexible deadlines and different formats to complete assignments, I aim to empower my students to do their work in whatever way works best for them so that it promotes their autonomy their individual needs and learning styles all at the same time. One key strategy I have involved here is offering a range of due dates, giving students a choice to submit work earlier or later. This helps them stay focused and engaged in their work, which reduces anxiety and prevents procrastination. For instance, as Aycock and Uhl found in their study, students are ―overwhelmingly in favor of the time bank,‖ which allows for a grace period on assignments (Womack, 2017, p. 517). Another important aspect I have here is the grading system. Shifting from rigid grading systems to more flexible models, like contract grading. In the grading policy, I have encouraged students to have a say in the grading process and allow them to for their decisions as well as to ―supersede an authoritarian decision‖ to help them reduce stress for students (Womack, 2017, p. 518). As Peter Elbow suggests, grading less strictly on ―low-stakes work [smaller assignments]‖ can incentivize timely submission while focusing on completion and progress rather than perfection. I want to implement his idea because I believe in the importance of progress in writing, I consider the growth students have made from the beginning to the end of the course. So, if I see my students genuinely working hard and improving, I take that into account when grading. By implementing these strategies, I aim to create a dynamic and supportive environment where students can develop the foundational skills necessary for research writing while also fostering intellectual curiosity and critical engagement.

Encouraging Critical Thinking and Identity Exploration Through Animal Studies

Incorporating Animal Studies into an English 102 class enhances students' writing skills and helps them become better thinkers by understanding complex and evolving human-animal relationships. This interdisciplinary subject offers a unique angle to see, question, and analyzebroader issues of power and responsibility. As one of the most popular animal rights activists and a great French philosopher, Jacques Derrida argues, ―The animal looks at us [concerns us], and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there,‖ suggests rethinking our relationship with animals is a starting point for profound ethical and intellectual engagement (Derrida, 2008, pp. 7, 29). This approach aligns with two of the principles of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), where learning to write; and writing to learn are mutually reinforcing. As students learn to write, they improve their ability to convey ideas; as they write to learn, they sharpen their ability to think critically about topics as well. This dual process makes writing a powerful tool for intellectual growth.

I enter a classroom with an optimistic assumption that students possess enough knowledge of their worlds, and this experience has to be the content of their writing. I also understand that students' experiences need further refinement by interacting more among themselves, with me, and with the readings they have. To foster this, I assign various work and class discussions that challenge them to think about different viewpoints on important issues on animal rights.

As Donna Haraway writes, "I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates" (Haraway, 2008, pp. 3-4). This insight shows how everything is interconnected in our lives, offering students a lens to consider how writing can articulate and challenge our place in a shared world. By exploring these themes, students can develop a deeper understanding of how writing helps them articulate and challenge their sense of identity and their relationship with the natural world.

Kopelson's idea of performing neutrality in composition pedagogy aligns with this approach. Rather than being completely neutral or authoritative, I would adopt a pedagogical strategy that encourages students to engage with various perspectives (e.g., on animal rights) without imposing a particular view, thus fostering a critical and open dialogue. Students need to be encouraged to challenge the traditional focus on ―authentic self-presentation‖ and embrace the concept of ―self-creation‖ (Kopelson, 2003, p. 133). I create an environment where students feel safe to explore and discuss diverse perspectives without fear of judgment or alienation.

Derrida's theory of deconstruction complements Kopelson's approach, as Derrida challenges the notion of fixed meanings and stable identities. Through his concept of différance, Derrida argues that meaning is always shifting, which echoes Kopelson's rejection of rigid, authentic identities. Both emphasize that identity and meaning are not fixed but continuously shaped through interaction. In the textual analysis essay, I have stated, ―Remember you are not

arguing about the topic; you're analyzing how the author gets their point across" (see*Appendix: Syllabus*, p, ix). Similarly, in the argumentative essay, I've asked students to "It is necessary to show that you understand different opinions, so briefly mention opposing arguments (also called counterarguments). Then, explain why you think your argument is the best‖ (see*Appendix: Syllabus*, p. xii). I believe this encourage students to engage with diverse perspectives and develop the skills necessary to think critically and ethically about complex issues of animal rights. Adhering to this approach, students will not have static representations of themselves or their ideas as "rigid valorization of authenticity" would dictate but will be empowered to explore multiple identities without being confined to one rigid viewpoint (Kopelson, 2003, p. 133). Inspired by Derrida's experience of imagining himself as a cat and Ballif's concept of "becoming," I am thinking of incorporating activities that allow students to imagine themselves as a farm animal, a farmer, or a consumer (p. 140). This exercise also encourages them to engage with different perspectives, helping them better understand others. This make the class interesting because of the experiment with different roles and engage in new ways of thinking since they are not bound by rigid ideas of who they are or how they should think.

A Syllabus as a Reflection of Teacher Identity

When I designed my syllabus, I saw it as more than just a professional task. I considered it as a personal expression of who I am today, my identity that is a whole accumulation of all my past. I wanted the document to represent not just the course but also who I am as a teacher and as a person of where I am from. So, I chose to include a sub-heading of ―About Your Instructor‖, where I included a small smiling photo of mine too (see*Appendix: Syllabus*, p.vi). It has a short description of myself, along with my country, describing as ―Nepal, a country of peace, home to the world's highest mountain, Mt. Everest, and the birthplace of Gautam Buddha‖ (see*Appendix: Syllabus*, p. vii). In many ways, I felt my identity was woven into the syllabus. I deeply wanted to proudly show my roots and motherland, acknowledging where I come from. Only then, I immediately moved to explaining my beliefs about teaching.

Putting all of this together gave me a sense of ownership, authority and purpose. I felt like I was saying to my students: ―this is my course, my values, and my guidance that you will be following throughout the semester'. At the same time, I was very aware of the weight of this responsibility that came with it. Around twenty to twenty-five students would be relying on me, reading the syllabus I wrote, following the structure I built, and receiving grades based on my evaluation. This realization was both humbling, profound and meaningful, so I made sure to design everything with care and thoughtfulness.

I included major projects, clear expectations, and learning goals, but I also tried to make the tone warm and approachable rather than strict or formal. For example, I used informal, conversational language in some of the sections in the syllabus so that students would not see me as a distant or overly strict and intimidating teacher rather, I wanted them to feel comfortable exploring ideas freely without any pressure. I believed that if the syllabus looked welcoming, students would be more open to learning and engage with the writing process expected from the course. I also made

sure to highlight my teaching strategies, the grading system, and ways students could succeed, balancing structure with encouragement. In this way, the syllabus became more than just a technical document—it reflected my identity, my teaching philosophy, and my commitment to guiding students in a supportive, studentcentered way.

Conclusion

I have designed this course to be more than just another writing class. To me, it is a comprehensive framework for teaching students how to write, research, and think critically. I do not want to limit students to work only on traditional essays. Instead, I encourage them to create multimodal projects, like videos or presentations, so that students can express their ideas in ways that resonate with them for the final project. This way they can express their ideas being more authentic and achieve meaningful learning goal. I also know that everyone learns differently, so I have built flexibility into the course by allowing any necessary changes in the beginning, middle, or end to accommodate students' expectations in the syllabus. Also, students' topics of interest in animals are to be included to boost their ownership and connection with the syllabus. My goal is to give students the resources, tools, and confidence to take proprietorship of their learning and success as well. More than just writing skills, I aspire to help students become engaged citizens—someone who is reflective, considerate, and intentional in their actions towards animals both in writing and in real-world situations. I have crafted this syllabus not just to impart writing skills, but to ignite a lasting passion for learning about animals and a dedication to ethical interaction with the world that includes non-human beings. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how teacher-driven, student-centered syllabus design, grounded in principles of pedagogical autonomy and flexible content, can foster deep intellectual and ethical engagement, offering a model for curriculum reform in more rigid educational systems.

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