

## Syllabi are not contracts

The Cranky Professor

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Just as a matter of fact, a course syllabus is not a contract between professor and student. The Academic Calendar tells us that marking schemes must be distributed the first day of class, but even marking schemes, the Calendar says, may be altered at the professor's discretion, though students must be notified in writing of any alteration. The Calendar does not say course syllabi are contracts.

And it's a good thing that a course syllabus is not a contract, for it shouldn't be. Were syllabi contracts, professors would not be free to change their plans for their course in response to contingent happenings or their sense of how the course is going. Since often enough professors need to change their plans in order to serve their students well, professors should be free to change them.

Why distribute a syllabus at all, then, if what's on it can be changed at the professor's whim?

A fairly detailed syllabus expresses the professor's intentions with regard to what material the course will cover and when it will cover it and how the professor will teach it. Knowing these intentions will help a student to understand what is expected of her and help her to feel at home in the course.

A fairly detailed syllabus also imposes a degree of discipline on the professor, preventing him both from getting too picky and slowing things down too much and from getting too spirited and moving things along too quickly. Still, sometimes a professor will find that skipping some material he intended to cover will better serve his overall conception of the course, or that introducing material he didn't intend to cover will. Leaving professors free to respond to their sense of how the course is going makes good pedagogical sense.

The point that course syllabi are not contracts is pretty straightforward, and the reasons why they should not be contracts are fairly easy to grasp. Making that point, then, and presenting those reasons, wouldn't be much worth doing except to combat misconceptions. Unfortunately, more than a few students are labouring under misconceptions here.

Students who think a course syllabus should be a contract between the professor and the student, binding the professor to deliver the course just as she intended to do before getting into it, have a faulty view of education. They think of it as a product. They want to look over the specifications of the product before purchasing it, and then they want what they purchase to conform to those specifications.

But education is not a product. It's more like a process, the process of coming to acquire a set of open-ended abilities and competencies. There's no solidly reliable way for a professor to know prior to engaging with the particular students in the course how to manage that process well. Only by monitoring class discussion, listening to the questions her students ask, observing where they do well and where they struggle on tests and assignments, can she hope to manage it. That, again, is why it is best that no one require the professor to teach according to the syllabus she distributes the first day of class.

I hope I haven't suggested that the student is at fault for mistakenly supposing a syllabus is a contract. Any fault here is primarily that of professors and administrators, for we have long now been tolerating, even encouraging, the idea that education is a product we deliver to students, and, thereby, that students are customers of what we're selling. Sadly, we've long been tolerating and encouraging a great many ideas antithetical to education.