

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note How to Subvert Your University's Canned Curriculum

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How to Subvert Your University's Canned Curriculum*

1. Never, EVER voice your intention to subvert. If you ask up front, the answer will be "No," and then if you get busted you're done. If you don't ask and get caught, you can still probably feign confusion (although you won't be able to pull this off twice, so follow these tips and don't get caught).
2. Include the standardized syllabus you're expected to teach in your learning management system or course website. This is important, because someone may access it for assessment purposes (nobody ever *actually* assesses anything¹; assessment is mostly an exercise in box-checking and ass-covering, so you don't need to worry that someone is going to confirm that you've posted the standardized syllabus and THEN go on a deep-dive-dig through the rest of your online resources to unearth your Real Syllabus; this won't happen).
3. Never tell students where the standardized syllabus is. You must locate it somewhere that doesn't require a lot of scrolling for someone in an official capacity to find, but if you never reference it, follow it, or show students where it is, they will probably not know that it ever exists. If any of your students *do* find it and reference it, say this: "That's a standardized syllabus template that I'm required to post in the system, but I use my own syllabus, which is the one I sent you." Any student who questions this is super-intelligent. Super-intelligent people are, by definition, opposed to canned curriculum, because canned curriculum is stupid. So, the vast majority of your students won't question your subversion, and the ones sharp enough to detect it will be on your side anyway. Bases covered.
4. Create your real syllabus as a PDF or info-graphic --- something visually appealing and stable; don't use a Word document.
5. Start a Facebook, Twitter, and/or Instagram account(s) that you use only for your course, and disseminate your real syllabus via these networks. Post all assignments, updates, etc. to these sites.
6. By Week 2 of the semester, your students will be well-accustomed to this set-up, and they'll never even look for the standardized syllabus.

Caveats and Troubleshoots:

1. Even though you're not following it, you must be intimately familiar with the standardized curriculum, because you still need to teach the same information; you'll just be able to teach it more effectively and meaningfully, because you'll actually like what you're doing. (This is the true idiocy of canned curriculum: It's not only boring to learn, but boring to teach, and students can smell teacher boredom like a cadaver dog smells a dead body [standardized curriculum is, by definition, a dead body; it's dead before you even get it].)
2. Find out what the "assessment artifact" for the course is. You'll need to work that into your real syllabus, but it's probably only one assignment, and at least it won't hijack the entire course. Be sure to have students submit that one assignment to whatever system is used for assessment gathering.
3. If you have that rare student who doesn't and won't use social networks, then you'll have to individually e-mail things to that student. Just do it. It's a pain, but it's not as bad as teaching from a standardized syllabus.
4. This is the most important point, and your subversion success hinges on your ability to achieve this goal: You must teach well. You must be a strong and dynamic and well-liked teacher. You must be confident in both your content knowledge and in your ability to establish rapport with students. If your students are happy and performing (i.e. you get good evaluations and your students aren't complaining about you), nobody wastes time going on a reconnaissance mission to figure out what you're doing; they just leave you alone.

*I only promote this practice because I know that it works, and because I know that it's good for students. I've used it myself when I've taught for institutions that are short-sighted enough to require using canned curriculum, and I've never heard a word about it from anyone. My students still learned what they needed to know, but they actually enjoyed and found value in it. I got strong evaluations, and my students produced work that evidenced their growth. Real teaching is about connection and creativity, teachers aren't delivery-robots, and there's no one-size-fits-all in anything. Higher education en masse may or may not eventually figure this out, but until that happens, it's our job as professors to employ a little subversion to do what's best for our students.

Notes

¹<https://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Insider-s-Take-on/242235>



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