

Filling in the Blanks

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Today I'd like to discuss a strategy that I tried in my own classroom last spring, in a survey of American literature. It comes from Chris Walsh, an assistant professor of English at Boston University, and he calls it the "Blank Syllabus". No, it does not involve handing out blank sheets of paper at the start of the semester. Rather, Walsh advocates letting students select some of the course readings.

Here's how it worked in my class. The textbook we used was a big anthology of readings (the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*), and I decided that, for each class, the students would read both prose (either a short story or a portion of a longer narrative) and poetry. I picked the prose readings and listed them on the syllabus, but I left blank spaces next to each class period for a poem or poems to be determined by the students. The class was small—only 17 students—so I was able to ask each of them to choose a reading for one day of class. Those of you with larger classes can have students select and then vote on the readings that will be included on the syllabus.

On the first day of class, after distributing the syllabus and introducing the students to the course, I explained the concept of the blank syllabus. The first assignment, due three weeks later, would be an essay in which each student, having picked a poem from the anthology to include on the syllabus, would make a case for why students should study this poem. On the day a student's poetry selection was slated for class discussion, that student would lead things off by recounting her argument.

The strategy had a number of benefits. First, it got my students to actually look at the anthology. Instead of reading only the pieces that I assigned, they spent the first few weeks of the term browsing through the book, reading unfamiliar poems, looking for one that appealed to them.

Second, it got them thinking about the value of the literature we were studying. Why read one poem instead of another? Why read poetry at all? Instead of a reading list dictated from on high (*these* are the most important

texts), it became a reading list produced by everyone in the class (*which* are the most important texts?).

This brings us to the third benefit: The blank syllabus showed students that they are crucial players in the class's dynamic and outcomes. It signaled to them, right from the start, that I see them as partners in their education. It helped instill in them an increased sense of responsibility towards the coursework, the instructor, and not least of all, their classmates.

Mine is hardly a scientific study, but I had a lot of success with this approach. I can't say whether having a hand in choosing the course readings made the students feel more empowered. But there's no question that the blank syllabus led them to engage better with those readings and each other than my previous classes. The students were much more enthusiastic about reading poetry—always a challenge, I find—and the open-mindedness and curiosity with which they approached their peers' choices was great to witness. I think they found that they have a lot to learn from each other; that's something that teachers might find, too.

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