

**Research Note**

**Radical Syllabus Modification/Elimination: Reflecting Exigent Communicative Emergency**

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**Introduction**

In the fall semester of 2018 and again in the spring of 2020, I felt compelled to work frantically to radically modify, then finally with exasperation ditch altogether what looked to me as a suffocating syllabus. The Brett Kavanaugh versus Christine Blasey Ford saga was unfolding and would be covered live by every major USA network, numerous online magazines and streaming service (Malone, 2018). As real-time events appeared at a frenetic pace, I deemed my syllabus redundant and worked furiously with my Theories of Communication class to play hopscotch across the text and the shredded fragments of my former syllabus. This happened again with the radical and immediate pivot to exclusive online education in light of the novel Covid-19 Corona virus lockdown in March of 2020, and then weeks later on May 25 with the televised murder of a Black man George Floyd at the knees of four officers in the Minneapolis Police Department and the civil unrest that exploded nationwide. In this backdrop, this paper speaks to the need for radical syllabus modification in light of exigent communicative events that require immediate focus.

**Syllabus Wake-up Call # 1: Kavanaugh, Blasey Ford Hearings**

On July 9, 2018, President Donald Trump announced Brett Kavanaugh as his pick to replace Justice Anthony Kennedy on the Supreme Court, followed days later, on July 30 by a confidential letter written to Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif) from an alarmed Palo Alto University psychology professor Christine Blasey-Ford, accusing Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her in high school during the 1980's. Ford's allegations were made public on September 16 (Britzky, 2018) followed by Kavanaugh's denial a day later. On September 27,

both Ford and Kavanaugh testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee where Kavanaugh breaks into tears defending himself, while Blasey Ford testifies that she is "100 percent" certain that Kavanaugh assaulted her (Bowden, 2018). The following day the Judiciary advances Kavanaugh's nomination but agrees to a one-week FBI investigation into Ford's allegations, though never directly questioning either party or contacting corroborating witnesses listed by Ford. On October 5, the Senate ended its debate, Senator Susan Collins (R-Maine) announced she would vote for Kavanaugh, thus providing him enough support to be confirmed. Senator Lisa Murkowski (Alaska) was the only Republican to oppose his nomination.

The first day of instruction for our university's fall semester commenced on August 27, 2018 and ended December 10, followed by one day allotted for "Reading Day," and six subsequent days for "Examination Period" through December 18 of that term (CSUB, 2018). The syllabus had been crafted during the summer and posted days prior to the beginning of the fall semester. Using my text's sample syllabus with some adaptations, the meager content relative to women was pinned to the tail-end of my course outline to be covered closer to the end of November and the semester's end.

When Dr. Blasey Ford's stunning allegations of abuse were televised nationally in a soul-wrenching testimony that implicated Kavanaugh, followed by his tear-laden denial, I recognized that a radical turn must be taken with my pre-prepared syllabus, and a jump from the first chapters to the last were in order. Clearly Blasey Ford's deposition underscored and exemplified crucial aspects of Sandra-Harding and Julia Wood's *Standpoint Theory* (Griffin, p. 447), though second to the last chapter in the text; Cheris Kramare's *Muted*

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*Group Theory* (p. 460) which occupied the *last* chapter in the text; and lent discussion to Deborah Tannen's *Genderlect Styles* (p. 435).

I explained to my students the significance of these historical moments, ditched the "obligation" to follow the syllabus, reconfigured pre-posted assignments positioning the last chapters on women (and in the sample syllabi) as primary and the remaining chapters as secondary and in some instances tertiary if visited at all.

### My Staid Syllabus

My Theories of Communication syllabus reflected the requisite course schedule of lectures, weekly readings and text-related Blackboard written assignments replete with due dates and points associated with each response. The classroom instruction generally reflected the sequential outline of the reader-friendly text I have been using since its publication in 1991, then in its ninth edition, *A First Look at Communication Theory* (Griffin et al, 2015) and touted by McGraw Hill as "The leading college textbook in the field of communication theory." As a newly minted tenure-track professor perceiving that I needed all the help I could get, I initially selected the text for its ancillary instructional materials: chapter outlines would certainly help in that which I might inadvertently overlook or underplay; definitions were clearly important as were "Questions to Sharpen Your Focus," the ready-made multiple-choice and essay examinations, emphasis on key names and terms, discussion suggestions and numerous exercises and activities.

Most important to me, however, were the six sample course schedules for syllabi adaptation provided for both quarter and semester college sessions. While the author did note that due to the text's breadth it was probably not possible to cover all 37 chapters and that instructors should select topics based upon their preference, all six samples from the three male authors seemed to make "logical" progression from the first chapters, later designated "Division One Overview" (Griffin, p.1) clustered in four chapters describing and examining the respective definitions of communication theories and explaining how they are formed and what they do, to "Division Two Interpersonal Communication" (p. 52), more expansive in its reach in the explication of 11 theories that cover titles such as "Relational Dialectics" (p. 136) to "Cognitive Dissonance" (p.200).

Taking my cues from the syllabus samples, I moved systematically through the 482 pages, and as our

university made the conversion from the 10-week quarter system into the semester schedule, I was doubly grateful for the two-system syllabi design options and readily adapted them. While illustrative contemporary examples have served to update and underscore the material, some chapters recrafted for simpler explication, a few chapters archived and replaced and "classic" theories maintained, most theories occupied the same general *location* in the book, and the same general location on my syllabus. Three of the final four chapters are situated under "Division Five Cultural Context" (p. 388), beneath the subheading "Gender and Communication" (p. 430), representing chapters 34-36 and which hosts four of the nine female theorists in a textbook that houses the contributions of 34 male scholars. As I moved through my evolution and perhaps revolution relative to the positioning of "Other" in society, I one day woke up to the full realization that my syllabus, which reflected the sample syllabi, which in turn reflected the text, relegated nearly half of the female contributors (which made up only 25% of the text's authors) to only three of the final chapters. Further, only one Black male made the cut, and as a brief mention, only one Black female (her worked buried within a white female scholar's chapter). In a book entitled "A First Look at Communication Theory," symbolically at least, the sparse contribution of female scholars, female scholars of color, and scholars of color period was instead given the *last* look. When I again closely examined my syllabus, I recognized that sadly, as a female academic, as a womanist and as a years-long Standpoint theorist advocate, I had given us all the short-shrift. It had become increasingly problematic to craft a syllabus around and relegate pertinent female and representative person-of-color scholarship to a last-approach examination during national historic media-centered events that focused on women's lives and Black voices. Never was this more apparent than during the run-up to the Supreme Court hearings around nominee Brett Kavanaugh and counter-witness Christine Blasey Ford, followed a year later by Black Lives Matter protests.

This reflection is not *necessarily* to be construed as a critique of Griffin's textbook, but rather an examination of how academics, of indeed how I, often create syllabi around instruction manuals designed to ostensibly make for more fluid negotiation of textbook content. In the multifaceted *non*-driven professorial world these pre-designed tools serve as pedagogical aids; replete with discussion questions, study guides and multiple-choice examinations that Dickson et. al (2006) suggests may produce no significant benefit for the student but may be preferred by the instructor

(Garavalia et al, 2000) and heavily relied upon as a perceived practical necessity for moving forward with the complex process of scrutinizing much of the topical material covered in the college classroom (Altman et al., 2006). Indeed, promotional material for instructor consideration of new textbooks touts supplemental teaching aids replete with PowerPoint, outlined lecture guidelines, and links to diverse technological resources (Clark, J 2014; Kirkwood, A2014; Vadsberger, 2011). Sample syllabi prove an enticing and potentially helpful assist yet may prove burdensome in times of existent threats. In *First Look* (Griffin, et. al., 2014) all three male authors post their respective syllabi for the users' regard, yet one author's sample includes only four female theorists and bypasses altogether "Standpoint Theory" which focuses on women and the inequities of gender, race and class (Ledbetter, 2014, in Griffin).

### **Syllabus Wake-up Calls #'s 2 & 3: Covid 19 and George Floyd**

On March 17, 2020 as I was unlocking the door to my office after class on my California campus, our department secretary stepped in front of me and stated bluntly, "All classes have been cancelled and all offices will be closed from now through the end of the term." Classes were to continue virtually, with a brief week reprieve to reconfigure and thrust content online through a virtual platform. From many of my colleagues, a collective panic ensued.

One political science faculty person was chagrined, what would happen to "our plans?" A syllabus was, after all, a "contract" between faculty and student, and now it would be dashed. As a union representative that constituted part of the executive board, cries of distress were rampant, faculty discombobulated, and students perplexed.

The college scrambled to offer faculty emergency online "how-to" courses on converting pre-constructed syllabi to workable Blackboard, Zoom, or Canvas platforms, yet with little to no consideration for how to radically turn-on-a-dime and redesign or reconsider *content* to meet nationwide murder, mayhem and malevolence where it lives and to dissect it through both gut responses and academic discourse. In fairness, this abrupt halt around business-as-usual was thrust upon most universities due to the Covid19 pandemic but was exacerbated just weeks later by the assassinations of George Floyd and Ahmaud Abrey.

## **Why Radical Syllabus Modification?**

### **Syllabi Are Regarded in Multiple Ways**

Some faculty consider the course syllabus a contract between the instructor and the students that seeks to communicate the general plan of the course and the way the plan will be implemented (Marcis & Carr, 2003). In a world that appears to grow increasingly more litigious, the syllabus can be mired in contractual framework that administrators feel may keep the university safe from formal and informal grievances and that may include the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities, how the instructor will accommodate students with particular learning needs, information on academic dishonesty, policies related to academic freedom, behaviors that could affect a student's grade, and disclaimers (Parkes & Harris, 2002). Bers, Davis and Taylor (1996) found that one university had two syllabi for each course, one created by the department to ensure that all instructors cover required content, and the second that elaborated on the first, contract-like syllabus, instructor-specific that "limits the instructor's ability to act arbitrarily" (p.1).

Syllabi are misconstrued for iron-clad contracts. Conventional college administrative and faculty "wisdom" generally cling fairly tenaciously to an idea of a syllabus protocol suggestive of a bible-type regard: Nothing should be changed; nothing should be altered. While not a contract with God, certainly one with faculty, students, and the university at large. Literature suggests that this reverence has begun to soften; when examining student and faculty preferences around syllabus construction, researchers found that both groups fell below the neutral position with the statement "Nothing in the syllabus should be changed once the semester begins" (Garavalia et al 2000, p. 6), suggesting that both prefer a somewhat flexible syllabus. Rumore (2016) asserts that though some literature, faculty members, and students may consider a syllabus as a contract, the final arbiter is the judicial system which has not found it to be so primarily because "such interference by the courts would open a floodgate of litigation from academically unsuccessful students" (p. 2).

Most syllabi do not address university mission goals. Clearly this had never been a consideration in the preparation of my own syllabus or obviously an addition recommended by the text's authors, but Eberly, Newton and Wiggins (2001) argue that if education goals and the university mission as stated in the catalog are not consistently addressed in the syllabus, and if syllabi are passed from one generation of faculty to the next with established format and

adhering to faculty tradition and custom “We may be forced to accept the idea that nothing substantial drives syllabus construction” (p.71). The authors note that chapter headings merely point to the “topic of the day” delivered in lecture format and viewed as a calendar of events (2001).

Syllabi are prepared much in advance of the actual class meeting. Universities encourage a timely posting of the syllabus and most ideally prior to the first day of class. In fairness, this allows students to purchase textbooks, peruse content, and ostensibly gain some feel for the direction of the course, yet Sogunro (2015) argues that precisely because syllabi are often prepared ahead of class meetings, the needs addressed are predominantly presumed and prescribed with little or no attention given to learners’ felt, real or immediate needs and as such, instructors should not make their syllabi a finished product needing no modifications. Smith and Razzouk (1993) in an earlier examination of students’ use of syllabi asserted students’ nonuse of the document for pertinent class information.

Syllabi may thwart the growth of intrinsic motivation. Because a syllabus is crafted at the hands of the instructor replete with explanations of points and demerits based upon student performance, it may well be construed an extrinsic impetus upon which most aspects therein may be exhaustively selected and overseen by the professor. Svinicki (2004) suggests that learners’ intrinsic motivation relieves the instructor of the task of constant supervision and reinforcement and contends that if extrinsic motivation is provided for a behavior that was initially already intrinsically motivating, the tendency is high to kill the intrinsic motivation and thereby leave the learner dependent on the extrinsic motivator.

Syllabi have the potential to enhance or detract from faculty-student rapport and perceptions of competence. Based on myriad factors and a complex mix of elements that may be integrated into a syllabus, researchers suggest syllabus “tone,” that is, friendly or unfriendly determined student perceptions of instructor approachability, warmth and motivation (Harnish and Bridges, 2011), that a detailed syllabus would more likely rate a hypothetical teacher as being approachable and caring (Saville, Brown, and Marchuk, 2010), and that adding modifications *to syllabus tone affects warmth but not competence assessments of both male and female instructors (Waggoner Denton and Veloso, 2018). Yet other research reports that rapport diminishes if faculty discourage use of technology as stated in the syllabus but rises if students’ technology dependency is acknowledged and its use is encouraged (Stowell, Addison and Clay, 2018).*

Based upon race and gender, syllabus may fail before beginning. No matter how tightly prepared a syllabus or how heavily it may be endowed with all the innumerable tweaks and modifications to render it “perfect,” nothing seems to alter the perceptions around the preparer of the syllabus if she is a Black, female, professor. Bavishi (2010) showed that despite experimentally manipulated documents designed and presented to students to render African American and Asian men and women professors equal in all categories, students evaluated Black female professors to be the lowest on competence, interpersonal skills, and legitimacy scales than their White and Asian counterparts. Both Black and Asian professors were judged to have significantly less interpersonal skills than White professors. Greenwald and Binaji (1995) found gender and racial bias to be both explicit and implicit. Fisher (2019) earlier studies seem to foreshadow their findings. Thompson (1998) states that historical, inequitable treatment of women in the workplace compounds the issues of low status due to both race and gender for African American women faculty. It may not be surprising that students, despite an adherence to the preciseness of any document offered by a Black female professor, may well pick up on the intrinsic attitudes of majority faculty. Delgado (1988) found an increase in racist or subtle racist behavior by majority faculty and majority students toward minority faculty; and in a later study Delgado (2002) acknowledges that the cultural resources and epistemologies that faculty of color bring to academia contribute to the goals of higher education and to the overall knowledge base in academia, yet these resources often go unrecognized or devalued. Implicit bias may also be communicated to the students due to the relative invisibility of Black female professors, as in total, tenured Black women in 2019 made up only 2.8 percent of the tenured faculty in the U.S. universities, at a number that has been stagnant for a long time (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021). Examining gender exclusively, Fisher (2019) found student backlash in ratings against more recent female hires who were tough graders, however this resentment was mildly abated if students found the female faculty member very attractive or “hot.”

### **Movement towards Radical Syllabus**

#### **Construction Approaches**

In recent years, educators have experimented with, modified, and in some instances eliminated the syllabus altogether.

Koval (2013) found that favoring a 65-minute student-immersion legal simulation activity with just 10 minutes of first-day syllabus review was favored by close

to 70% of his law students, that 91% were more interested in the course, and that every student claimed to understand the teaching style and classroom expectations after the activity such that a detailed syllabus overview was unnecessary. He contends that the activity as processed by the students provides them ample information indicating that the instructor should not feel bound to the syllabus simply because this is what students expect.

Moreno-Lopez (2005) presents students a syllabus in week one of class, allows them to review and prepare any changes they wish to make and bring them to the next class. During the following class meeting she steps out of the classroom, allows students to jointly discuss their respective changes, reenters when students are ready then actively discusses and negotiates syllabus modifications that remain open and fluid in the re-design throughout the semester. Moreno-Lopez, I. 2005. "Sharing Power with Students: The Critical Language Classroom." *Radical Pedagogy* 7 (2). <http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue7/2/moreno.html>

Blinne (2013) states that learners frequently encounter authoritarian, top-down classroom models as they review the syllabus often crafted exclusively from the instructor's goals, interests, requirements, and expectations. She envisions the syllabus as a "living" (p.41) and negotiated document that may better serve the discursive environment of the class, leaving room to embrace or depart from her syllabus and noting that if something is not working the class knows and works immediately to create a new direction.

Hudd (2003) asks students to provide input into the course infrastructure by providing them with only a "skeleton" of the syllabus that includes a weekly topic, text, supplemental readings but no assignments. Students' homework is to provide assignments, discussed in class, and appropriated to the syllabus after several class sessions. Hudd, S. S. 2003. "Syllabus Under Construction: Involving Students in the Creation of Class Assignments." *Teaching Sociology* 31 (2): 195-202

Singham (2007) advocates abandoning the syllabus altogether, approaches his first class with only a tentative timeline of readings and writing assignments, then weeks into the semester and in collaboration with students, discusses the best ways of assigning meaningful grades as they collectively decide what goes into a good paper or talk, then jointly create rubrics to assess them.

Flowerdew (2005) suggests that syllabus construction might best reflect three classic design approaches recrafted and integrated into one, reflective of: task-based, in which learners engage in real-life situations; text-based, upon which the content is based on whole texts, and content-based, planned to help students with their university content courses and skills associated with specific subject disciplines through continuous, incremental practice over a period of time.

Yet perhaps the most radical syllabus modification comes recently from Black and Native scholars. One such emergent movement is the hashtag syllabus, a tool for social justice change. Unlike the syllabi found in your typical college classroom, hashtag syllabi are found on the internet and are user-generated, crowdsourced, and strive to be open-access, are created between activists, scholars, and social media users, explained thus:

In *On Truth Telling and Intellectual Activism*, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins asserts that intellectual activism ought to embrace speaking truth to power and speaking truth to the people; hashtag syllabi often effectively embody both of these strategies. While there does not appear to be an intended audience, there appears to be an intended purpose: to disrupt distorted interpretations of knowledge, events, history, and truths. Thus, hashtag syllabi might be a move towards the decolonization of knowledge production due to their creators and curators, the knowledge(s) they hold, and their interdisciplinary nature. (Lyons, 2019)

Lyons (2019) suggests that these syllabi should not be categorized as low-quality academic work, but instead persons should consider it a way to "challenge racist, classist, and masculinist considerations of what "quality" knowledge production looks like, and who should have access to it." Interdisciplinary in its content, a hashtag may contain everything from journal articles to songs, poetry, and prose.

On August 9 2014 in St. Louis, Black teenager Michael Brown, 18, and his friend were walking in the street, when an officer drove by and told them to use the sidewalk. Words were exchanged, the officer and Brown scuffled, and the officer shot and killed the unarmed Brown. (AP, 2014).

Marcia Chetelain (2014) is recorded as the first hashtag syllabus created in response to the murder; The Ferguson Syllabus, which she prompted faculty to use to understand "the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the criminalization and marginalization of black and brown communities. The following is a collection of research articles used to

inform the arguments in the [public statement](#) on the events in Ferguson.” (sociologists for justice, p.1)

The Chetelain syllabus was followed by the Charleston Syllabus (Williams, C, & Blain, K.N., 2015) in response to the murder of nine Black church-goers by a white supremacist; The Lemonade Syllabus (Benbow, C. 2016) celebrating Black womanhood; The Orlando Syllabus (2016) around the nightclub slayings of 49 people in attendance at a gay bar; and the Standing Rock Syllabus Project (2016) around the Native response to the Dakota pipeline.

### **Brief Discussion**

This paper is not a plea to end syllabus creation or thoughtful syllabus construction apropos to what any professor feels pertinent to her coursework. It is instead, an alert and perhaps permission to understand that in exigent situations, the syllabus may be irrelevant, and may not meet the poignancy of the moment. As a Black female professor and one who considers herself a Standpoint theorist, an exigent moment for me would be the symbolic dressing down and eventual muzzling of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford as she testified about being sexually accosted by Supreme court candidate Brett Kavanaugh, the on-camera suffocation of George Floyd at the knees of Derek Chauvin, an Ahmad Aubrey running through the street of his neighborhood to be gunned down by white vigilantes on camera, Breonna Taylor murdered in her bed at the hands of police, thousands of Black Lives Matter protesters in the street voicing their fervent opposite

on to these murders and others, the storming of the Capitol at the hands of homegrown largely White terrorists. As numerous scholars note, Black women bring their lived history, their concern for community and others, their empathy, their intellect, and perhaps even their soul into the instructional environment that is our academic home (Kawewe, S. M. 1997, Woldia 2021, Sharpe, V. 2012). I argue that the instructor *should* provide herself absolute permission to act subjectively and intuitively in response to a situation/s upon which the globe bears witness, and in my case for

which I have lived experience. If the text-reflective syllabus can aid in the explication of critical events, use what can be extracted, however, if the syllabus appears insufficient or otherwise momentarily irrelevant, radically modify or discard it altogether. A strict adherence to so-called academic protocol may be the antithesis of what is required in the moment. In this case, there is little need to cling tenaciously to a syllabus.

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