

## Kathleen Talvacchia, Union Theological Seminary, New York, and Raymond Williams, Wabash College

This special issue focuses on a key element of communication between teachers and students — the course syllabus. It is often the first word. The project to gather syllabi and to engage colleagues in conversation about them began as an activity of the AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning. The Committee sought to promote a constructive and rigorous dialogue on the development of course syllabi, one that would take seriously the ideas and logic of a syllabus, rather than focusing on the details of assignments and readings. It was the Committee's belief that most professors have little or no conversation on their course syllabi, and that many desire this critical engagement of ideas. It was the hope of the Committee that such a dialogue would promote the *scholarship* of teaching, that is, the ways in which the construction of a course is an engagement in furthering one's learning and understanding of a subject area.

With these hopes and assumptions, the Committee began work with Richard Freund, editor of *Spotlight on Teaching* and Laurie Patton, associate editor, on an issue that would deal directly with the topic of syllabi development. We were asked by the Committee to conceive and implement such a project. What follows is the result of our collaboration.

We were given several religion course syllabi that Committee members had selected from ones that had been loosely gathered from various colleges and universities. The syllabi were chosen on the basis of their strengths in content construction, pedagogical implementation, creativity and originality. None of the participants put their syllabus forward, and they expressed surprise that theirs had been chosen. A couple commented that they did not consider that syllabus to be their best or most representative. The Committee also sought to gather a diverse group of subject contents, pedagogical styles and class size arrangements. From this group of syllabi the participants for the project were chosen.

The two of us took seriously the Committee's mandate to us to develop rigorous dialogue around course construction. We tried to conceive of ways to engage the participants by providing a safe space for lively critique. We believed it essential that educational form and subject content cohere; that is, we sought a process that would allow an authentic conversation to occur through what we did as well as what we talked about. To that end we decided to conceive of the project in the form of an actual dialogue among participants. Instead of asking the participants to write *about* a dialogue with a colleague around their syllabus, we asked them to *actually dialogue* with each other as a way of forming the "main body of this text. It was our hope that this issue of

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, as an experiment in the scholarship of teaching, could model one way of approaching the task of critical conversation about course design and development.

A colloquium held at Union Theological Seminary, New York on Saturday, May 2, 1998, was the vehicle for this dialogue. Participants were asked to come to the colloquium with a dialogue partner of their choice — someone who they felt would give a fair and helpful critique of their course. During the events of the day the participants and dialogue partners engaged in a mixture of general pedagogical discussion about course design and specific discussions about the particular syllabus to be examined. A significant period at the end of the day was set aside for a group discussion regarding all of the syllabi. Specifically, the agenda of the day was as follows:

- 9:00-9:30 — Breakfast and gathering
- 9:30-10:00 — Introductions and orientation to the day
- 10:00-12:00 — Discussion on pedagogical logic and course design, led by Mary C. Boys, Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology, Union Theological Seminary, New York
  
- 12:00-1:00 — Lunch
- 1:00-2:30 — Conversation on individual syllabus in dialogue pairs
- 2:30-4:00 — General conversation in large group on the subject of all the syllabi

Notes were taken of the conversation in dialogue pairs and were submitted to us at the end of the day. The general conversation was audiotaped, providing us with an actual transcript of the discussion. Both the notes and the transcript provided much of the "raw data" for this *Spotlight* issue.

## **Syllabi and Participants**

We enter the dialogue first through an introduction of the participants, both those whose syllabi are under consideration and their dialogue partners, as well as the syllabi themselves. The syllabi will be generally introduced for the purposes of contextualizing the conversation. Readers are encouraged to examine the complete syllabi for this edition located in the *Spotlight on Teaching* website, or you can also look at a much expanded listing of syllabi for a variety of courses in the

### [AAR's Syllabi Project](#)

. The AAR's Syllabi Project attempts to be an ongoing vehicle for member interaction on the question of syllabus development and we hope that this issue motivates you to enter into the

dialogue we have begun here by sharing your syllabi with others on the AAR Syllabi website. The process of entering your syllabus is simple and many thousands of other AAR members and students will profit from seeing your work posted on the website.

Participants in our dialogue have included their e-mail address in the syllabi for the purpose of continuing dialogue about their course. You are greatly encouraged to converse with them as the dialogue engages you.

**Alice Bach, Stanford University**

**Dialogue Partner: Jennifer A. Glancy, Le Moyne College**

**Syllabus: Sexual Politics in the Ancient World**

"The major objective of this course is to examine attitudes toward women and their status in the ancient Near Eastern and classical societies. Thus, a central challenge will be to explore ways in which we can reach the stories of women in a world shaped by male interests. As modern readers who have experienced abrupt changes in social attitudes, especially in respect to issues of gender, sexuality, and marriage we shall read these ancient texts conscious that our modern attitudes challenge traditional values. Thus, we shall have to read with bifocal lenses: aware of our modern attitudes while simultaneously understanding the religious and cultural conditions and practices that shaped ancient texts."

**Mark Hulsether, University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Dialogue Partner: Elizabeth M. Bounds, Emory University**

**Syllabus: Religion and Culture in the United States: The Political Culture of White Protestantism Since 1945**

"On issues from A to Z, abortion to Zionism, it is impossible to understand the contours of U.S. political culture without attention to religion. This course explores how people who fall within the white Protestant majority — in one or another version from fundamentalist ultra-conservatism to postmodern feminist radicalism — have thought about and sought to influence U.S. society since World War II. It examines both how religious ideas and practices shaped sociopolitical commitments, and how religion was shaped by historical and social forces."

**Lawrence Mamiya, Vassar College**

**Dialogue Partner: Mark S. Cladis, Vassar College**  
**Syllabus: Tradition and Modernization in the Third World**

"An examination of the central problem facing all Third World and developing countries, the confrontation between the process of modernization and religious tradition, worldview, and custom. Along with the social, economic, and political aspects, the course will focus on the problems of cultural identity and crises of meaning raised by the modernizing process. Selected case studies will be drawn primarily from Asia and Africa, although the general patterns can be applied to countries elsewhere."

**Kenneth M. Morrison, Arizona State University**  
**Dialogue Partner: Martha Townsend, Director of the Campus Writing Program, University of Missouri, Columbia**  
**Syllabus: Ritual, Symbol, and Myth**

"Ritual, Symbol, and Myth introduces the study of religion. In other words, REL 305 introduces students to the conversation of Religious Studies. Briefly stated, the course is concerned with the 'religious' as it pertains to meaning in human life. Throughout the course we will examine the thought of three scholars of religion. We will ask how each contributes to the humanistic, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary study of religion. Since REL 305 is an unvarnished exploration in interpreting the study of religion, it is *not* recommended for sensitive adults or the closed-minded. Enroll at your own risk. REL 305 is also an introduction to critical reading, thinking, and writing in the study of religion. Because such skills are not often taught, you need to be aware that the course may well be a traumatic experience for you."

**William R. Schoedel, University of Illinois**  
**Dialogue Partner: Raymond Williams, Wabash College**  
**Syllabus: The Bible as Literature**

"The purpose of this course is to rescue the Bible, as best we can, from rigid defenders on the one side and from overly hasty detractors on the other side. To do this we need first of all to explore the distinct character of the literary units of the Bible and to recognize their diversity in cultural and religious terms. That step is taken in this course. The Bible, as we shall see, is by no means as narrow and monotonous as its detractors often imagine; nor is it as tidy, proper, and mechanically perfect as some of its defenders assume."

We facilitated the day's conversation and were assisted on site by Mr. Ric Carson, doctoral student in New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

### Dialogue and Conversation

The colloquium began with a session on the art of constructing a syllabus, led by Mary C. Boys. Using the work of Stephen D. Brookfield (*Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, Jossey-Bass, 1995) and Lee S. Shulman ("Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review*

57/1 1987: 1-22), she led the group in a discussion the topic of syllabi construction as part of the scholarship of teaching. She specifically focused on two topics: 1) The question of what a syllabus reveals about our relation to the subject matter, to the values shaped by religious commitments, cultural context and personal experience, and to the teaching-learning process; and 2) The transformation of course content into an accessible structure.

The most important aspect of the day was the one-on-one conversation about the syllabus in dialogue pairs. Clearly, this was the most enjoyable part of the day's events for the participants, and in many ways, the crux of the project. Participants were given a series of critical questions to consider in order to stimulate their analysis of the syllabus. These questions are reprinted below.

Some questions to consider with your dialogue partner about your syllabus:

1. Regarding your students: Who are the students you teach? What do you know about them and how they learn? What do your students already know about the course material? What are their motivations for being there? How do you acknowledge and affirm their prior knowledge, experience and beliefs? Why should students want to take this course?
2. Regarding contexts: Where does the course fit in your students' curricula? Are there subsequent courses that depend sequentially on what students learn in your course? Are there prerequisites for the course? What must the student know or be able to do in order to begin the course? How does your course serve institutional mission?
3. Regarding goals: What are your teaching/learning goals? What do you want your students to know? How to think? What to be able to do? To feel? What knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs do you want them to have as a result of your course? What must be taught/learned? What are the essential questions and epistemological assumptions of your discipline? What are the irreducibly most significant basic facts, ideas, concepts, themes and skills your students must know?
4. Regarding assessment: How will you assess student learning? How can you get feedback

on how well the course goals are being fulfilled? What ways can you devise for learning about student experience.

5. Regarding teaching/learning practices: How will your students fulfill these goals? By what specific strategies, assignments and learning experiences? Why do parts of the course come in the order they do? What are the purposes of your assignments? Why have the books and readings assignments been chosen?

6. What messages are you trying to convey in the syllabus?

7. What messages do you think that the students receive?

8. What has the syllabus helped the students to know about the content of the discipline?

9. How does the syllabus negotiate the demands of the content expectation with the demands of student needs?

10. In what significant ways has the syllabus changed over the years that you have used it?

With these questions we sought to provide both detailed inquiry and in-depth analysis. Participants were encouraged to use the questions as they were helpful to engage the subject content and pedagogical strategies. When they returned to the large group, we asked the dialogue partners to introduce the general discussion by summarizing salient points from the conversations. Here are their comments in their own words.

**Glancy:** Alice and I talked about the tensions involved in preparing a syllabus: flexibility as an ideal vs. respect for students' schedules and need for careful planning; detailed structure for the course as reassuring and helpful vs. detailed structure as inhibiting; and what we [faculty] want the students to know vs. what they want to know.

**Williams:** In our discussion of several points, we also touched on the value of a carefully structured syllabus that provides students with a disciplined framework for their work. That frees Bill to teach in more interesting, provocative, and surprising ways. Bill brought along the extensive study guides for every reading assignment and instructions for the writing assignments, so we discussed the relation of these to the lectures and discussions and how these flow together. Third, we discussed the teacher's own psychological needs of knowing that the course is going somewhere, and those are bound up with all kinds of performance needs and the teacher's sense of self. Finally, we talked about the goal of leading the students from a vague idea that the faculty member has his or her own opinion to a realization that both student and teacher can make sophisticated judgments based on careful study of the biblical material.

**Cladis:** In terms of goals of the course, Larry wants students to read critically and ethically, which involves integrating thick, rich, empirical descriptions with social theory. In terms of

contribution to the curriculum and the education mission, Larry emphasizes both the distinct contribution the course makes to the Vassar curriculum and the way the department deals with tradition and modernization. Finally, in terms of student assessment and praxis of teaching, Larry has a very interesting dynamic of critical reflection in which they are encouraged to say, "I thought this, and now I think that."

**Bounds:** Mark's course deals explicitly with the tensions regarding religious and sociopolitical commitments within the white Protestant majority on a spectrum fundamentalist ultraconservatives to postmodern radicals. It is not surprising that we dealt with the tension in Mark's role in gaining the trust of *all* class participants through respect for their commitments and his role as a self-respecting post-enlightenment intellectual who understands that impartiality is impossible.

**Townsend:** We discussed the way Ken very consciously sets up his course on "Ritual, Symbol, and Myth" to enact a ritual process in a way that combines form and content. The first part of that ritual process is separation, by which he means students learning to listen, students coming to know authors in conversation with each other who disagree and argue, and students learning to take responsibility for their own learning. That's the "separation" part. The "being there" part, for him, means a critical assessment of reading, writing, and thinking. The process of revising and editing initiates students into disciplined thinking as an active part of the religious studies conversation. In the "return," students come to intellectual empowerment and occupy a place in cultural discourse. Finally, the celebration part of the course comes when he congratulates the students for having made it through the ritual of initiation, which is often accompanied by applause from the students.

As you can see from the transcript above, the participants used their individualized time in various ways. The questions provided the structure to delve into the ideas and structures of the course. Each pair sought to clarify the rationale that drives the course as a subject to be learned and the ways it can be presented to facilitate optimum learning. Also, a focus on the learners and their needs surfaced in these dialogues as an essential aspect of the course design and implementation.

Following this one-on-one dialogue time, the group conversation opened up to a more general and free-wheeling examination of all of the syllabi from the gathered participants. The afternoon was rich in insights, debate, repartee, and good humor. For the purposes of this essay we have selected parts of the dialogue and rearranged them under topics, attempting to retain the spontaneity of the actual discussion among the participants. These segments are presented with an aim to bring the reader into the conversation, to allow you to enter the flow of the ideas

and issues in this very lively exchange.

### 1. On the Topic of Pedagogical Logic and Course Design

**Glancy (to Morrison regarding the ritual structure of his syllabus):** As you were talking, I was thinking about the Brookfield article from this morning. The one question that emerged for me from that article is, "How do the students see us?" So, you have told us how you see the process. Do you have any insights into how the students see that process, or how that process looks from the students' side?

**Morrison:** Well, I know that the separation part is really disturbing in lots of ways, at the same time it is engaging. The questions about religious studies start with a book that criticizes the notion of primitivism in the study of religion, which leads to my criticism of objectivity and subjectivity. It criticizes their common sense view of the world. They get engaged in the material and go home, but when they try to explain to others what they're experiencing, they do not have words for it at that point. By the time we get to the end of the course, they're able to articulate that and take responsibility for reading, thinking and writing in a way that they couldn't even imagine at the beginning of the course.

I have taught this course every semester for fifteen years and several times in summer schools. I know that the nine different parts of my syllabus address the cultural issues and the learning issues that come up. I understand these stages and deal with them all actively. So, I'm quite confident that I am describing the likely experience that the student will have, and I am confident of my ability to intervene productively in that experience.

I tell them at the beginning that the first stage of the process is confusion, and that it's okay. I promise them that if they'll work with me, I'll see them through. The congratulation at the end is to remind them that the promise was always there. Given their willingness to engage me and the textual materials, they really have achieved something.

**Mamiya:** Can I ask you a question? Your syllabus points out that this will be a traumatic experience.

**Morrison:** Maybe.



**Mamiya:** And then you say it's "not recommended for sensitive adults, or the closed-minded." Why are you coming with this heavy cautionary?

**Morrison:** Because my students are in a very large public university and have little experience with the humanities by and large. I mean that I have a mix of humanities students and a few religious studies students in the class, but mostly they're graduating seniors who are taking the course either for humanities credit or for the writing credit. So, they are under duress. I want them to understand that I'm going to play hardball, that I'm not going to be polite, and that one of the things I'm going to have to get them over is their own politeness and their reluctance to take a stand on the meaning of anything. They're cultural relativists, and from day one I talk with them about their refusal to take a position and about the fact that the entire system has never asked them to. A position in this instance is to discern an author's contribution to the humanistic, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary study of religion. So, I'm asking them to do something they're not accustomed to doing, which is to make sophisticated judgments, not merely to state a personal opinion. But, I'm also really playing hardball; I'm asking them to think about religious studies as a kind of conversation about human reality that probably is not happening in their departments.

**Bounds:** I think you're raising a good point about different populations of students, because I understand from my previous teaching appointment exactly what you are talking about. There is a real difference in different teaching locations in what exposure students have to critical thinking in the humanities. The curricula of some students involves no experience of critically engaging authors or humanistic ideas. If you're an engineering student, that is irrelevant, you haven't done it, it's not happened.

**Morrison:** Well, this is directly related to their understanding of religion as a private belief system. [Bounds: Right. That, too.] So I actively counter that, again, from day one.

**Talvacchia:** It seems to me that is also related to the theme that's running through a lot of these about structure and nonstructure. It sounds like you're providing a kind of structure with that by saying, "This is what it is, and if this is not what you want, then maybe you shouldn't be here." And by creating that structure you're trying to free up other kinds of thinking.

**Morrison:** Yes.

**Talvacchia:** That's one thing I hear you saying. And that's a theme I see running through our conversation. How much structure, how little structure, what's going to free the student, and what's going to trap the student.

**Hulsether (regarding his syllabus on "Religion and Culture in the United States"):** There's a lot of trauma involved in the premise of the class. The premise is to map out a spectrum from very far right fundamentalists to neoconservatives to liberal pluralists to liberation theologians. Because we're in East Tennessee, the students are mainly white students steeped in the Bible belt. I assume that everyone is somewhere on the religious and political continuum because I'm working with theological and political points and where they overlap. So the premise is that the students are in a dialogue and that we're going to map out the structures. In every unit someone's extremely angry. Many of them come in thinking that what it means to be religious is cut and dry, individualistic, and conservative. I'm a temptation sent by the devil to test them. For some of my students, not all of them, to follow me is to risk their eternal soul.

**Schoedel:** And you don't believe that?

**Hulsether:** That actually speaks to the tension. You can see that I assigned my book here, so students know that I'm on the spectrum too. One of the things I do in the book is dog the neoconservatives, so they figure out that I'm not neutral even though my role in the class is to be the fair referee also. The structural tension is there because I don't believe that you can really be neutral, but, at the same time, I want to be respectful of my students. I insist that the debate be fair and that they present each position in the strongest and most accurate manner before they begin a critique.

**Bach:** What you said at the beginning was that different people get angry with different parts of the course. But they experience both being angry and being comfortable, so they get both dynamics within that one course.

**Schoedel (regarding the issue of the teachers' point of view in course design):** We can't be neutral, but we can take the students through detail. I think students need detail introduced in such a way that they can see for themselves why a professor says what he or she does or takes the position he or she holds. In the first couple of years of my teaching [at Brown], students were used to the most sophisticated debates and judgments. Now students tend to

think that teachers are simply presenting opinions. One of the values of dealing with classical material is that you can emphasize a detailed reading of the text. I have students read two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and I push them regarding details. Most of the students say, "Boy, it doesn't seem that Hosea says the same thing." I can then say: "It's a matter of presuppositions, but its presuppositions you share with me because you can't read it any other way. From grade school you're always warned against reading things out of context. Apparently, the author of Matthew wasn't trained the same way." Thereby, students engage a fundamental point about how to interpret language. One problem of engaging students with modern issues is that there are static notions that are unquestioned and unquestionable from their point of view.

**Hulsether:** It's really close to home. From other classes I've noticed that it's easier to get them to think about the Bible because they keep it a little bit more at arm's length.

**Carson (to Hulsether regarding the relation of rationale to course construction):** In your introduction you say that the course is not a survey of religious diversity, that it focuses on internal complexities and conflict within white Protestantism. Yet, one of the readings is King's letter from the Birmingham jail. I was thinking that even though the class might be primarily white students, there are also black students there. You might end up dealing with black history in anecdotal ways without sufficient bibliographic material. Do you understand what I am saying?

**Hulsether:** It is something I worry about a lot. The main argument in my book is about the emergence of liberation theology. One important aspect of that involves white liberals confronting civil rights and the civil rights movement. Throughout the class, I map out four positions on the religious and social-political spectrum in relation to a range of issues in post-World War II culture, and two primary issues are gender and race. That is where the King reading comes in. However, all courses cannot treat all topics, and my other 300-level courses deal with other issues: Rel 352 on the black church and Rel 355, which is structured as a dialogue between white and black Christianity.

## 2. Relationship of Course Assignments to the Rationale and Logic of the Course Design

**Bach (regarding structured assignments and course goals):** I want to go back to Bill's syllabus, if we could. I wonder about the way you have structured the paper topics for your students and what they are to cover in an essay. Even though you give them a very wide range

of things they can read, aren't you being awfully directive of what they are to look at and how they are to think?

**Schoedel:** I am! I tell them that. That's part of the course. I also tell them that if they don't want to do it that way, they don't have to, but they should come to see me and reconstruct the paper in their own way.

The essay assignment is handed in at the middle of the course because I am hoping to squeeze more out of them than you usually get at the end of the semester. I also want them to base it on some issue, closely related to the first part of the course. I also believe, however, that most students don't have much of an idea about how to write a paper in Bible [or in religious studies], and you owe it to them to give them some suggestions. My handouts regarding papers are meant in the spirit of suggestions, although most students actually take the suggestions and understand how to move through writing a paper. Others are sitting down the night before and they don't know how to write the paper, but that's their problem because they waited so late. So, in other words, I have found such instructions to be helpful to them in writing essays. But, I'll allow them to do anything they want.

**Bach:** But, you're not really interested in their argument or their conclusion because you have already set those out.

**Schoedel:** You seem to look at the paper assignments and say, "Oh, Schoedel is saying this, but the students have no idea what those signposts mean." Actually, it takes their hard work in following the guidelines in order to say, "Wow, I see where we're headed." They have no sense of this at the beginning. It is my way of getting them into things.

Another aspect is the assignment of materials they must read to prepare the essay. I tell them, "Read other materials, but you gotta read these materials." Why? Because there's a lot of bad stuff out there — more in our field than in any other field. I tell them that up front. There's a sociology in this course. The sociology is this: we use books in this course that are written by people who are responsible scholars. Who are responsible scholars? They are people like me. That's what I tell them.

**Townsend:** As a teacher of writing, my first reading of Bill's syllabus led me to think that he was

being overly prescriptive and, thereby, inhibiting what students would be able to do on these writing assignments. On my second and third readings of the syllabus — [Schoedel:

*You*

read it three times?!] Yes, I did! [Schoedel: That's probably more than any of my students did!] That is probably why I'm in the line of work I'm in. I actually read syllabi as a hobby! — It occurred to me that what you are doing is providing a heuristic for students in order to write a paper. Students may not know how to construct arguments in given disciplines. What you are given them is a heuristic for doing that, a heuristic that is still open-ended in that you allow them to make changes in that heuristic if they wish.

**Townsend (asking the group about course assignments):** As the outsider to this group, I found that in all five syllabi you have fascinating assignments that you craft and give to your students, but you don't tell them who the audience is for what they are writing. I wonder if each of you would answer who you see as the audience for these various kinds of assignments that you ask your students to produce. As writers ourselves, we know that we craft an article for a journal with that particular audience in mind. A different journal in a field will have a different set of readers, so we craft a different article for that group of readers. How do you tell your students who they're writing for?

**Schoedel:** I don't know why I didn't write it in the syllabus. I tell them: "Write the paper as though you were writing for a friend, trying to explain what is going on in this course. For example, If someone says that the books of Moses were not written by Moses, why do they say that?" It takes the engagement out of the project if they write for me, and some students are tempted to write in the paper, "Well, I know you know the answer to that question."

**Townsend:** If they write the article for a friend, it wouldn't be in as elevated a language as it would be if, say, they were writing for a journal. [Schoedel: Right!] Would you be as satisfied with a piece written for a friend in the place of one drafted in more elevated style? Would the grade be as good for the student?

**Schoedel:** As a matter of fact, I discover that when a student tries to write brilliantly or in elevated language, it tends to be incomprehensible. It is some fancy kind of speech they picked up somewhere that doesn't make any sense.

**Mamiya:** Let me say something about the audience for my seminar. This is a 300-level course and it usually serves as a senior seminar. The audience is the whole seminar. Students write

weekly, critical reflection essays, which I call a journal. The seminar divides into groups of five each — we usually have fifteen or so students in the class — and each group is responsible for presenting their critical essays to the whole seminar. They photocopy the essay for everyone, and that's part of the seminar. We also have oral presentations that students do on their paper topic. The students prepare an outline of their paper and give a 20-30 minute oral presentation to summarize their research. The whole seminar is the audience. I'm the one who grades it and evaluates it, but it is prepared for the whole group.

**Bach:** It depends on whether I'm teaching a large class where the audience for the papers are my Teaching Assistants or if I'm teaching a seminar where the audience is quite clearly me. I find that to be a problem only because I was a writer before I became an academic, and it's very humiliating to spend a long time writing a paper and then have it drop down a hole with only one person ever reading it. It doesn't give you a sense of wanting to revise and finely craft your prose style.

All our students have to take a writing course in their freshman year, and we have a program for writing across the curriculum. Hence, the writing of Stanford students is already pretty good by the time I get them. At the end of the quarter, I put all the papers in the reading room for other students to share. I ask them to submit two copies, one on which I put my comments in the margin, so they get a personal copy back from me, and a second that we put in the reading room. Then, they at least have the sense of pride of place because other people in the seminar will read their papers. They're religion majors, so they develop a sense of identity. That is one way I have found of getting around the demoralizing aspect of students writing for an audience of one.

**Cadis:** I agree that it's demoralizing. It seems to me that one of the things we're doing is training citizens; that is, we're training scholars to think publicly. Ideally, there is some point to student writing informed or engaged by a public debate. I think it is important that we expand the audience insofar as we can.

We have departmental colloquia in which everyone reads everyone's paper. There is not consensus on this topic, but I think that students are more invested and take their writing more seriously when they know that other students are reading it. [Bach: Absolutely.] Another thing, in terms of the level of language, I think we should emphasize that to address a general educated audience well requires very powerful language, which is, in fact, elevated. It might not have a lot of jargon, but when we say, "Write for your friends," we also say, "and write well."

**Morrison:** One last comment: I deal with the question of audience as a verbal phenomenon. We talk about it, it always comes up, and the general answer is that you are writing for a general reader, so you have to consider me as such. Marty's point is very well taken, and I think it deserves a sentence or two in the part of my syllabus that I've called the "general guide to writing an author evaluation."

**Mamiya:** We've been talking a great deal about writing. I have the students present their papers to the seminar on a rotating basis. It gives students a chance to speak about their ideas publicly. I don't think we take seriously public speaking and speaking well. I think that is very important. We are educating public citizens, and, when they graduate from schools like Vassar, they should be able to speak to significant issues.

### 3. Teaching and its Relation to Rationale and Course Design

**Glancy (regarding student seminar presentations):** Can I comment specifically on this? I think that you are exactly right. It is wooden at first, but that is the reason that you have to keep doing it. It's the same way with writing. At first it is bad, but improvement comes with practice.

**Bach:** Jennifer is braver than I am. She turns her whole class over to students.

**Glancy:** Well, I do a summary.

**Schoedel:** And you get paid for this?!

**Bach:** That's an interesting comment. But, I'm not brave enough to do that. I am afraid that at the end of my two-and-a-half-hour seminar — if it has been led by an adult who gets scared in the middle and says, "Let's divide into groups and share," because she realizes the session is dying on the vine — the other students will complain that nothing happened in class that day and that the class was really dead. But, I don't do what Jennifer does, which I think is the key to helping students improve, because she meets with the students several times before they make their presentations, rather than just sending them out on the sea by themselves. That may be the key factor distinguishing between a wooden presentation and the student who is somewhat

at ease because they have already worked it out with the professor.

**Talvacchia:** A response to that?

**Glancy:** I want them to go in and shine, so they need a lot of external structure. So, you work with them outside. I try to think of different kinds of structures they can use. For example, if they are running a seminar and want to engage other people in discussion, I suggest that they assign two or three of their classmates to write a paper in preparation for that day. They bring copies of the paper for me and the student leader. The leader then knows in advance the people who are writing papers for that day, so they can use that resource in discussion.

**Cladis:** I am going to change the topic back to how we bring our authority into the classroom because we do have authority there. No matter how we dress or what we tell students... [Someone: We give the grades!] Yes, we give the grades and we write the syllabus. I think the student role in the classroom and in student presentations is one way of getting at that. It raises questions of flexibility because in many of these presentations the students craft their own way of presenting the material and narrowing the focus.

I have found that students often copy the teaching they are experiencing at the college, especially your own teaching. I don't mean this to be self-congratulatory, but I think the students tend to reflect more and more my style. And I like my style more now than eight years ago. Hence, I think the student presentations are getting better because I am getting better. Whereas eight years ago I went in there with a clear agenda and lectured even in a seminar — and they also lectured when they gave presentations—now they are more fluid. They are easing up on themselves in leading conversations because I am starting to do that with myself.

The other question regards our authority in the classroom. Do we preside? What is our presence in the classroom? [Someone: When students are doing presentations or anytime?] Specifically, presentations in a seminar context. But, in general, I assume that none of us is a dictator, nor can we abrogate out authority. So, where do we position ourselves and how do we deal with authority?

**Bounds:** I was remembering an experience just when you said that. I had to be evaluated for tenure at the last minute, and the teaching evaluation included a classroom visit. So, the review



team showed up in my class on a student presentation day. Whereupon, one student simply self-destructed right in front of the whole class. I was thinking, "What do I do in this particular moment?" I had modeled in our preparation that the student would be in charge. So, I didn't intervene. I just let it happen. I am not sure that was the right thing to do, I have to say, not because of the happenstance that there was an evaluation team sitting in the room, but because of pedagogical reasons. I had modeled so strongly that they needed to claim that time that I didn't want to step in. That was the choice I made in that circumstance.

**Glancy:** Yes, we do learn from our teachers how to teach, and that's how I learned to teach. When I was an undergraduate, my Shakespeare professor had us conduct a three-hour seminar. We made assignments to other members of the class, but she also said, "Give me an assignment, too." She wrote the very best seminar papers. They were great.

**Bach:** I think that is a problem.

**Glancy:** Why? She wasn't giving me a grade.

**Bach:** I know that. You weren't giving her one either. I tend not to assign my own books or articles or films until the very end of the course because it might overpower them. They don't think they can do it.

**Glancy:** We didn't have that problem. Maybe it is because we are not talking about a book or an article. We were writing a single-spaced, one or two page paper in the course of a week. I guess my teacher established an ideal for me. When a student is conducting a seminar, I try to be another member of the seminar, being aware, however, that's an illusion. In other contexts, I use different models. I preside at student defense of a senior project. Sometimes I lecture.

**Morrison:** Sometimes I give my students an example of a very bad author evaluation that I did as an assistant professor. I don't reveal at first who wrote it. We look at the officious character of the review. I was an assistant professor writing a critique of a controversial senior professor with a national reputation, so I knew that I could go only so far. It resulted in a review that is an embarrassment now. So, we go through the review and talk about its characteristics. Then I confess that I wrote it and talk about how motivation affects voice. Students love that exercise.

**Talvacchia:** I want to throw in a comment here about my presence in the classroom. I think that is very dependent on who the group is, and I don't just mean the distinction between doctoral students or masters students. I mean that each group has its own energy about what kind of direction or non-direction it needs.

I feel that the questions, "Who?" and "What for?" are primary for me, even before "What?" The content is decided in part by disciplinary demands, but it is also related to, "Who are these people? What are they here for? What do they need to know? What do they want to know? What is the purpose of all this?" I adjust my presence based on these factors. There are some groups that you just sit back and they go. For other groups I have to be more directive. And for some groups, I have to intervene. I think that is part of planning a syllabus. That is the hard part of setting up a syllabus, because you don't know ahead of time who they are. What I have tried to do is give the general outline of the syllabus and then make changes along the way. I try to adjust to who the people are in front of me. I have a general idea at the beginning, and I try to adjust along the way. [Someone: That depends on whether a syllabus is viewed as a contract or a prediction.]

**Williams:** Bill's syllabus is very structured: Here is the assignment. Here is the way your grades will be given. Here is what you are going to do. Our conversation was instructive to me because Bill gives very clear statements in the syllabus about those things that faculty members have to do and often despise doing: You have to give grades; you have to be fair in how you decide the grades; you have to set minimal standards. Bill provides for those things — what we sometimes call "the mechanical things" in the syllabus, even before he knows exactly who the students are, so that when the students come, he can be free. A major issue in syllabus preparation is the relation of the structure in the syllabus and the kind of authority you want to establish in the class, or, as you stated earlier, flexibility in the syllabus and freedom in the class. There is a balance there. How the teacher relates those two aspects and fulfills the various responsibilities we have as a faculty person is very important. The question has circled back to me as the relation between the structured character of the syllabus in relation to freedom in the class for both the faculty member and the student.

## Understandings and Conclusions

Several important understandings emerged for us as a result of this process. One involved the necessity of the work done in pairs as a precursor to the general discussion. The time spent one-on-one was key to framing the discussion on pedagogical logic and design rationale. It allowed the discussion to center on ideas, rather than just techniques. When a course is merely the vehicle for expressing the work of one's research, then the ideas are in the research, not in

the course design. But, when a course is another way of thinking about and articulating a topic of knowledge, then the course design is part of the one's scholarship. A well designed course is about ideas, as well as instructional strategies and assignments.

The ability of the participants to pair with a dialogue partner of their own choosing created a safety factor that allowed a greater depth of discussion. In general, it is fair to say that most of us want constructive critique, but no one wants to be unfairly judged. With the assurance of a constructive dialogue partner, participants were able to take risks and delve deeply into the course rationale and syllabus, assessing the parts that worked and that worked less well or did not work at all.

The combination of safety and rigor of the conversation in dialogue pairs, in part, fueled the energy and critical thinking of the large group discussion. Individual participants came to the large group discussion with a clear sense of the value of their own work, and the experience of constructive dialogue. The trust factor helped the larger discussion to have a depth of critical thinking and analysis.

The dialogue made clear to us the variety of ways that ideas can be presented, content can be taught and learning tasks can be accomplished. Truly, there are many ways to teach a topic, and the particular audience to whom you are speaking is significant in your decision about how and what you will teach.

Finally, the activity of dialogue about a course syllabus challenged participants to critically examine the "why" of their course conceptualizations. It forced them to be clear about the rationale and to be able to articulate it clearly. This activity allowed the course to be critiqued at the level of peer interaction through the more "natural" format of dialogue. This dialogue, however, was with professional colleagues with whom communication lines had already been established and whose pronouncements could be depended upon for accuracy and substance.

This leads to an important conclusion that we draw from this experience. At least as seen in this group, there is a genuine hunger among scholarly professionals for regular conversation of this depth and rigor about course syllabi and teaching. We believe this is very likely true among most academics.

We recommend two strategies for departments and colleagues to use to facilitate discussions of course construction and syllabi: 1) Departments could gather for colloquia in which they discuss a syllabus for one of the courses, using the questions suggested above; or 2) A department arranges for one or more of their colleagues to have a conversation partner to discuss syllabi, and each faculty member brings back to the department what he or she learned from the conversation. Our experience suggests that these could be among the more enjoyable and valuable discussions teaching faculty could have. Try it — you'll like it!