

CRITIQUING THE SYLLABUS: INVITING STUDENT ASSESSMENT OF STANDARDIZED CURRICULA

COSIMA MATTNER

This teaching resource, originally envisioned for German language instruction, is a handout that asks students to respond to eight reflective prompts about the class syllabus in written form. ‘Reflection’ means here that students read the syllabus and articulate their own thoughts about it as responses to guiding questions. This reflective exercise has a critical feminist thrust, as it is geared towards deconstructing patriarchal epistemological power that is reproduced through educational curricula (in Western, here specifically German, societies; cf. Ahmed, 2016). The handout is meant to empower students to share their individual experience and thoughts about the class content and form, in order to contribute to increasing institutional diversity and acknowledgement of non-white, non-male voices in knowledge (re-)production.

I first designed this handout to accompany an introduction to the syllabus for a section of a foundational German language class that I taught at Columbia University. For the four foundational levels of language learning (Elementary 1 to Intermediate 2), my department has fixed curricula and syllabi with set learning goals that need to be mastered by all students in order to be admitted to the next level. Hence, instructors have limited agency with respect to redesigning the curriculum according to critical feminist citational principles. This is problematic insofar as the German cultural tradition has been dominated by white male voices, like many European cultures. Many syllabi feature a fairly homogeneous set of authorial positions and lack diversity. Non-white, non-male cultural artefacts have only recently received more attention, even though these voices have always already been an integral part of German culture in its heterogeneity and plurality (cf. Kelly, 2016, 2020, 2021). Thus, this exercise was meant as an opportunity to foster individual and collective reflection by students, the teacher, and the department on the course content; if the latter itself cannot be fundamentally changed, it can be approached critically.

This resource addresses the citational practice of the class as it surfaces in the syllabus: it draws students’ attention to what authors or scholars are cited and whose work is credited how. Hence, the resource is designed as a tool for

students to reconsider disciplinary norms of knowledge production, as it prompts students to question whose positions are reproduced in the syllabus. (Ahmed, 2016) The resource aims at questioning disciplinary traditions on a reflective and collaborative basis: as students complete the reflection handout, both students and the instructor get the opportunity to critically consider the content of the class.

The students' reflections have a twofold potential for the instructor: first, they deliver diverse, formative feedback on students' expectations for the class; and second, they may reveal blind spots in the instructor's or departmental syllabus's citational profile, which in turn may contribute to critical rethinking of the syllabus by the instructional team. Thus, the resource operates according to the principle of "critical pedagogy" in Paolo Freire's (2018) sense, in that it empowers students to critique the content of the class while simultaneously challenging instructors, and their institutional context, to critically reflect on their syllabus design.

The reflective component of the resource is significant insofar as reflection is a metacognitive activity yielding new epistemological perspectives for students and instructors. According to Boud and Walker (2005), reflection is "a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations" (qtd. in Kember, 1999, p. 22). This exploration involves problematizing preexisting ideas, structures, and narratives: as Dewey (1916) argues, reflecting begins in "a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives" for someone confronted with the challenge to select—for instance from a set of people in the field of knowledge (re-)production (in Kaplan, 2013, p. 7).

Through this reflection, students are prompted to think about the diversity of the set of scholars cited in the syllabus through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989), in terms of race, class, gender, and nationality. The goal is to generate reflection as openly as possible, in order to maximize the potential of students' critique. Thus, I designed the handout as an exercise in reflecting on the contribution of institutionalized knowledge production to the patriarchal oppression of non-majoritarian identities.

The demand to reform the German language curriculum is increasingly emphasized by different initiatives in German language teaching (Criser & Malakaj, 2020). A main source of inspiration for me were the principles of the

initiative Diversity, Decolonization and the German Curriculum (DDGC) whose aim is to minimize the contribution of German language education to structural oppression: “We recognize that these structural oppressions continue to inform curricula, communities, and daily life in and beyond academia, and that they do constant damage to our students, colleagues, schools, and friends.”

Two additional important stimuli for the design of this resource were the Learning Community Citational Practice as Critical Feminist Pedagogy led by Cat Lambert and Diana Newby at Columbia University in Spring 2021—and constant contact with my language program coordinators Jutta Schmiers-Heller and Silja Weber, who constantly challenge us to rethink the content of our classes with respect to principles of social justice.

The version of the handout given below could be used as a complementary activity to the introduction of any class’s syllabus at the beginning of a given semester. For other instructors interested in adapting this exercise, the handout could be distributed along with the syllabus before or after the first class session, to be handed in by the students in written form. The instructor could potentially share the anonymized results, marking overlaps or differences in students’ answers, or invite an in-class discussion of students’ thoughts on the syllabus as stimulated by the handout. Further, the results of the reflection could be forwarded to the course program coordinators to share concerns and questions about the syllabus and course design, and initiate critical discussions of what and who is cited.

To further expand and adapt the resource, I would suggest to anyone planning to use the handout to research the standards of disciplinary reflection and critique of citational practices in the respective discipline: Has a scholarly or instructional critique of the specific principles of knowledge reproduction been undertaken yet? If so, how and by whom? What other resources for stimulating student reflection on disciplinary principles exist? Comparing this work-in-progress to other resources could improve its success in the classroom.

As a work-in-progress, this resource should be adapted to the specific course design and the time that may be allocated to such a reflective exercise. Questions that remain for me include: (1) whether the reflection prompts are actually conducive to sharpening students’ critical view of the class; and (2) whether and how students might independently gather information on the scholars cited in the syllabus.

Potential limitations for this resource are that it is, after all, a reflective exercise that may not immediately result in implementing changes in the syllabus. One could consider applying the reflection to an old syllabus before the design of the actual syllabus for the respective class in order to implement changes in the respective class itself while it is underway. However, institutional hindrances or political challenges might require diplomatic communication by individual instructors with their respective superiors in order to facilitate the initiation of changes in the citational profiles of syllabi. To improve the short- and long-term effects of the resource, it could be developed as a questionnaire for a qualitative, or maybe even mixed-methods research project on critical feminist curricular change. Ultimately, the handout is meant to contribute to a long-term shift in citational standards and potentially even curricular design at the institutional level.

TEACHING RESOURCE

Student-facing Instructions

To set the stage for a critical engagement with our class content this semester, please:

- a) Read through our syllabus closely.
- b) Respond to the following questions by submitting this handout along with your responses.
 1. In your own words, what are the main learning goals of this class?
 2. Considering the learning goals, what material that is mentioned appears striking or surprising to you? How so – or what were your expectations?
 3. What authors, researchers, or more generally names are mentioned on the syllabus?
 4. Do some internet research on those names: who were these people, what was their biographical background, what struggles did they face potentially – and what were their main interventions?
 5. To what extent does our syllabus feature authors or researchers that you have never heard of before?

6. How diverse is the set of scholars cited on the syllabus with respect to such categories as class, race, gender and nationality?
7. What questions does the syllabus raise about gender, class, and racial hierarchies?
8. What would you like to see more or less of?

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.

Black Central Europe. (n.d.) Teaching. Black Central Europe.
<https://blackcentraleurope.com/teaching/>

Boud, D., Keogh, R., and Walker, D. (2013). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. Routledge.

Cite Black Women Collective. (n.d.). Cite Black women: A critical praxis. *Cite Black Women*. <https://www.citeblackwomenscollective.org/our-praxis.html>

Colgan, J. (2017). Gender bias in international relations graduate education? New evidence from syllabi. *PS, Political Science & Politics*, 50(2), 456-460.
<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1017/S1049096516002997>

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1(8), 31.

Criser, R., & Malakaj, E. (2020). *Diversity and decolonization in German studies*. Springer Nature.

Dewey, J. (1961). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan.

Diversity, Decolonization, and the German Curriculum. (n.d.). Guiding principles. DDGC. <https://diversityingermancurriculum.weebly.com/guiding-principles.html>

Dworkin, J. and Bassett, D. (2020). The extent and drivers of gender imbalance in neuroscience reference lists. *Nature Neuroscience* 23, 918-926. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41593-020-0658-y>

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 50th anniversary edition*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Germano, W., & Nicholls, K. (2020). *Syllabus: The remarkable, unremarkable document that changes everything*. Princeton University Press.

Itchuaqiyaq, C., Litts, B., Suarez, M., Taylor, C., & Glass, C. (2020). Citation as a critical practice. *Intersections on Inclusion: Critical Conversations about the Academy*. https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/inter_inclusion/1

Kaplan, M., Silver, N., LaVaque-Manty, D., & Meizlish, D. (2013). *Using reflection and metacognition to improve student learning: Across the disciplines, across the Academy*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Kelly, N. A. (2016). *Afrokultur: "der Raum zwischen gestern und morgen."* Unrast.

Kelly, N. A. (Ed.). (2020). *The comet - Afrofuturism 2.0*. Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung.

Kelly, N. A. (2021). *Rassismus. Strukturelle Probleme brauchen strukturelle Lösungen!* Atrium Verlag.

Kember, D. (1999). Determining the level of reflective thinking from students' written journals using a coding scheme based on the work of Mezirow. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(1), 18-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026013799293928>

McGregor, H. (Host). (2019, March 15). Episode 3.21 citing your sources. *Secret Feminist Agenda*. <https://secretfeministagenda.com/2019/03/15/episode-3-21-citing-your-sources/>

Mott, C., & Cockayne, D. (2017). Citation matters: Mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of 'conscientious engagement.' *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(7), 954-973. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1339022>

Tompkins, K. T. (2016). We aren't here to learn what we already know. *Avidly*.
<https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2016/09/13/we-arent-here-to-learn-what-we-know-we-already-know/>

Weber, B. (2018, January 13). The politics of citation. *Digital Feminist Collective*.
<https://digitalfeministcollective.net/index.php/2018/01/13/the-politics-of-citation/>

COSIMA MATTNER is a PhD candidate and teaching fellow in Columbia University's German Department. Her research focuses on 20th and 21st century trans-Atlantic literary history and theory. As a teacher of languages and literature, she has worked in Germany, Estonia, India and the US. Apart from academic assistantships, she has published and edited essayistic platforms online and in cultural management at Göttingen house of literature.