Ideology and Ideological State Syllabi

by William Vaughn

I thought I knew how to write a syllabus—until I moved to Missouri. After all, I have more than 14 years of preparation: more than a dozen courses designed and taught, a B.S., an M.A., and a Ph.D., scads of students, lots of supervisory experience. Syllabi everywhere—written, revised, evaluated. Having spent the previous nine years next door in Illinois, first as a graduate student and then as an adjunct (both at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), I never noticed that our neighbors in the Show Me state took syllabi so seriously. *I* certainly did and thought that I could actually manage the effort all by myself—that is, based on the disciplinary skills and knowledge I had developed over the years. Indeed, I had been very well trained before I accepted my first tenure track position at University of Central Missouri (UCM).

I got wind of my syllabus deficiencies the day before my first classes were to meet at UCM. The syllabi were already printed when a senior colleague came by to make sure I had included the requisite policy statements for each. He was refreshingly cynical about the whole thing. At the time, I had trouble keeping straight which directives came from where. I had a dim sense that some of these requirements originated from the state, and others from regional accrediting agencies. Some of the language was imported, and some had been crafted within the department in response to external requests. The wording seemed to alternate between oblique acronyms (MoSTEP[1]) and bland participles (thinking, communicating,

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William Vaughn *is an associate professor of English at University of Central Missouri. A founding member of two academic unions, he has published most recently in* PMPA, Workplace, *and the anthology* Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University *(2004).*

valuing). I had no reason to be suspicious of MoSTEP, whatever that was, and I certainly applaud thinking, communicating, and valuing, but I had no clear sense of how to plug these categories into my syllabi. My helpful, cynical colleague reassured me that I was probably already doing these things; I just needed to have the words in there. Someone, it seemed, would be looking for these at some point, and so long as the *words* were in the syllabus, it mattered very little whether the concepts ever translated into the class. Even if my students never learned to think, communicate, or value—and whether or not they or I ever mastered the MoSTEP—I was safe if, according to the syllabus at least, such behaviors were part of the class.

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As that first semester progressed, it became clear I was not the only one perplexed by these requirements, which appeared to proliferate with each department meeting or general e-mail. In addition to thinking, communicating, and valuing, there were other skills our courses might or should address, such as "managing information," "*higher-order* thinking," "critical thinking," and "interacting," along with specific knowledge areas that distinguished what we were doing in Humanities and Fine Arts from what other departments covered in Social and Behavioral Sciences, Mathematics, and Life and Physical Sciences. I consoled myself with the knowledge that even those with two decades or more experience in my department had difficulty understanding what all of these imperatives meant. Indeed, many salted their incredulity with sarcasm. During one department meeting, our chair informed us that syllabi were to be collected soon so as to measure our compliance with the various directives. Since the date of collection was to occur several weeks into the semester, we were struck by the possible discrepancy between what our syllabi looked like on the first day of class and how they would appear when we turned them in with all their "competencies" in order (mine, of course, were apparently incompetent). "Do you mean," inquired one of my colleagues, "we should submit Potemkin syllabi?"

One state conference, a Web site or two, several campus meetings, dozens of conversations, and a hundred documents later, I have some greater sense of why we were asked to write syllabi as we were. What remains unclear, though, is whether one should be more bothered or alarmed by such intrusions. When the matter is merely one of adopting a certain language to describe existing practices, state-examined syllabi are no different from the kinds of jargon-laden documents our profession itself invites: job application letters, or course descriptions, or conference paper proposals that mime momentary fashion in recycling buzzwords or

prevailing theoretical approaches.

Perhaps we allow too much in complying with such guidelines. A profession is entitled to police itself—that is, indeed, its signal feature—and the trust entailed in that process of self-examination comprises the premise behind academic freedom, peer review, and the possibility of scholarship at all. What do states know about such things? In their guise as service providers, states are concerned less with scholarship than with—to borrow the phrasing of the conference that initiated me into the world of ideological state syllabi—such matters as transfer and articulation. That terms such as these describe a real issue is undeniable: students

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will continue to move from one institution to another, for a variety of reasons. Does this mobility, though, require curricular facilitation? Who gets to decide that question? In Missouri, so far, the answer has been the Coordinating Board for Higher Education (CBHE).

It is possible to read the CBHE's documents with some degree of sympathy. The Board's statement on general education, for example, approximates some of my own reasons for being a teacher. "General education," reads the statement,

> is the curricular foundation of the American academy. It encourages students to acquire and use the intellectual tools, knowledge, and creative capabilities necessary to study the world as it is, as it has been understood, and as it might be imagined. It also furnishes them with skills that enable them to deepen that understanding and to communicate it to others. Through general education, the academy equips students for success in their specialized areas of study and for fulfilled lives as educated persons, as active citizens, and as effective contributors to their own prosperity and to the general welfare.
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> As the academy's knowledge of the world is structured, so must general education be constructed to introduce students to the traditional disciplines of the arts and sciences. As that knowledge is ever changing, so must general education alert students to connections between the traditional disciplines and to the potential for interaction among all branches of knowing, ordering, and imagining the real world. As the real world is diverse, so must general education inform students that the world is understood in different ways and provide them with the means to come to terms, intelligently and humanely, with that diversity. As diversities of knowing and understanding must be made open and accessible, so students must acquire appropriate investigative, interpretative, and communicative competencies.[2]

The brilliance of this statement stems from its almost subliminal evolution of discourses. Paragraph one neatly glides from the classical rhetoric of liberal education and a gesture toward Enlightenment universalism to the more mercenary implications of degree holding. That last movement artfully yokes a Lockean justification of individuals as "contributors to their own prosperity" with an echo of the "Preamble" ("the general welfare") that neutralizes any attempt to construe prosperity in purely financial terms. Paragraph two, after ritual bows to the inevitability of paradigm shifts ("knowledge is ever changing"), the empowering prospect of cultural studies ("the potential for interaction among all branches of knowing, ordering, and imagining the real world"), and the need for a multicultural perspective ("the real world is diverse"), concludes on a note of utter management blather: the hope that students can "acquire appropriate investigative, interpretative, and communicative competencies."

Perhaps I exaggerate, but the genius of these two paragraphs is that they lure you in with images of Socratic dialogue and lead you out by dangling multiple-choice, computer-graded exams, the better to "assess" those "appropriate competencies." This pattern continues in the next two sections of the document, "Responsibilities" and "Transferability of General Education Credit." Just from the titles, one discerns that while the first speaks to what a later section of the document terms "goals"—general, noble-sounding ambitions of what the CBHE here calls "the academy"—the second reduces these aims to the more immediate interests of those attending what is now labeled "[e]ach institution of higher education in Missouri." To borrow from that same subsequent section of the document, the material on transferability concerns not "goals," but "competencies"—specifically, "the portability of general education credit among Missouri's colleges and universities." Here we arrive at the apparent crux of the matter. Liberal arts, meet educa-

tion management organization. Goals, say hello to competencies. Socrates, shake hands with Tom Peters. Humanities, I'd like to introduce you to Good Practices.

Wrenching myself back from the comforting abyss of cynicism, I am obligated to report that, even within "Transferability of General Education Credit," the CBHE attempts to balance the interests of "institutions and faculties" with what it tellingly labels "their constituents." "Each institution of higher education in Missouri," the Board writes,

> fosters a program of general education. General education programs vary from institution to institution as each represents a statement reflective of the institution's ethos and mission. General education programs are developed by the faculty and validated by the institution's administration and governing board. Each institution expresses, through its general education program, the high expectations for the academic skills and knowledge that all students who complete degrees offered by that institution should master.

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Here as before, the noble sentiments are quickly chastened by much more practical concerns: the need "to ensure transferability of general education credit among" Missouri institutions. At no point in the document does the CBHE lay out an empirical case for the apparent crisis in transferability.[3] One might speculate as to the actual stimulus for this reform. Perhaps too many legislators' children had difficulty transferring credits; perhaps the national trend toward standards and testing in education at large sparked an interest in homogenizing higher education in Missouri. My greatest fear is that in sanctioning these interchangeable modules of general education, Missouri is further eroding tenure.

Think about it. General education courses are the ones most likely to be taught by actual, degreed academics.[4] But for many students eager to contribute to their own prosperity, these classes are simply the credits they are made to earn before they can receive the training that is their real educational ambition. As an English Ph.D. at a campus that provides a lot of this kind of training, I am sensitive to the way my own employment depends upon the competency part of the academy, as opposed to its putative curricular foundation. What will happen, though, once most or all of the institutions across the state have signed off on seamless transferability? If we are on record as accepting this regime—if our syllabi *attest* to this acceptance—how much will it matter *who* fulfills the promises of those syllabi? In one of those worlds the CBHE invites me to imagine, the prom-

ise of a syllabus would derive from the credentials of the person writing it. But if the state writes the syllabus, why would it matter whether the person teaching the class had a Ph.D. or was otherwise endorsed by the profession?[5] To be blunt, the more efficient we make education, the less it matters who teaches. (And if you are suddenly seized by an impulse to smash a loom, you are not alone.) The CBHE can pay endless lip service to "each institution's ethos and mission," but efficiency has a way of overriding these faster than you can say "transfer and articulation."

Indeed, the goals and competencies outlined among the four skills areas discussed in the "Statewide General Education Policy" provoke the same question the

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portability agenda did: where is the evidence that institutions were *failing* to inculcate these abilities? The categories (communicating, higher-order thinking, managing information, and valuing) suggest, at face value, undeniable aspects of a general education. Who *wouldn't* want to foster "students' effective use of the English language," or their "ability to distinguish among opinions, facts, and inferences," or their capacities "for solving problems and making informed decisions" and "understand[ing] the moral and ethical values of a diverse society"? This is boilerplate, and if the state of Missouri wanted to guarantee instruction that fulfills these goals, it could do what it should have been doing all along: hire qualified academics, afford them a climate in which to succeed, hold them accountable to the standards of their disciplines and employing institutions, and trust these professionals to transmit the knowledge and practices of their disciplines. If Missouri (or any state for that matter) is having trouble finding enough such individuals, I could scare up a couple dozen from my graduate institution alone.

Perhaps this last point is the most disturbing implication of Missouri's "Statewide General Education Policy." I know how I was trained within my discipline and what I was capable of doing once hired. I know what I do daily as a teacher and administrator in my department. My cynical colleague was right. Missouri wants my students to "conceive of writing as a recursive process that involves many strategies, including generating material, evaluating sources when used, drafting, revising, and editing." And before I knew that's what the state wanted, my students were practicing just such skills. The state wants students to "defend conclusions using relevant evidence and reasoned argument"—so do I. The CBHE wants my students to be able to "reorganize information for an intended purpose, such as research projects." I couldn't agree more.

In seeking to comply with its own first principle of good practice regarding transfer and articulation, the CBHE, along with six other educational associations and institutions, plus the alarmingly named PeopleSoft USA,[6] sponsored the DREAM Conference in February of 2001. DREAM—"Designing Real Educational Alliances in Missouri"—was one of the means by which the state hoped to ensure that "[a]ll policies and procedures relating to transfer and articulation should be easily understood, readily available, and widely distributed among students, faculty, and staff." [7] Given the magnitude of the project, which affects several dozen institutions, thousands of faculty, and hundreds of thousands of students,

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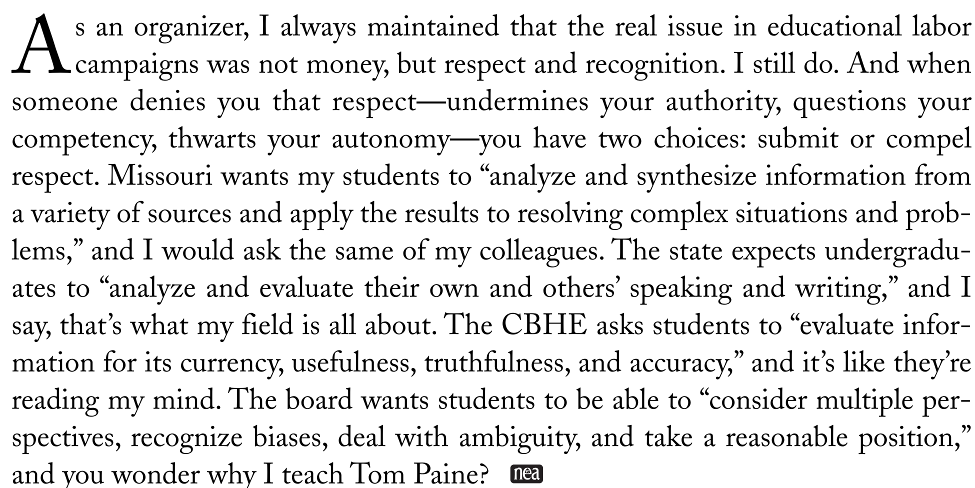
it would have been too much to expect the DREAM to be an entirely sweet one. The sessions I attended felt a lot like statewide department meetings—lots of joking and griping; little prospect for productive resistance—and no one really understood the agenda, other than that, by the end of the year, each of their institutions would be expected to be in compliance with the General Education Reporting Matrix. This matrix, which conjures images of some alternative reality, whereby education defies such seemingly real constraints as gravity, logic, or common sense, consists of five components: state-level goals, institutional competencies, courses and credit hours, non-course experiences, and associated assessments. The matrix, thus, is the graphic and theoretical endpoint of transfer and articulation, the cyberspace multiverse in which undergraduates achieve the status of pure energy beings, gliding with frictionless ease from one pixel of communicating to another byte of higher-order thinking.

In the months following the DREAM Conference, I attended several department and campus-wide meetings devoted to the transfer and articulation plan. The pattern is fairly predictable. We grouse and crack jokes; we reminisce about other such attempts to reduce education to an assortment of trendy buzzwords; we worry about the intrusiveness of it all, specifically how the CBHE will monitor our own assessment of students' competencies—and what the penalty will be for having too many incompetent students; we go along. As someone who spent the better part of his nine years in Illinois working to unionize graduate employees, I recognize how insulting it is to be an educator these days. When exactly did professors and the programs and disciplines that train them lose the right and ability to govern their own profession? Why do we continue to bow to ridiculous state pressures? Why should a board populated by lawyers, realtors, and ex-politicians[8]

dictate to educators who, in the current job climate, train longer than astronauts for the right to hold a college teaching position?



As an organizer, I always maintained that the real issue in educational labor campaigns was not money, but respect and recognition. I still do. And when someone denies you that respect—undermines your authority, questions your competency, thwarts your autonomy—you have two choices: submit or compel respect. Missouri wants my students to "analyze and synthesize information from a variety of sources and apply the results to resolving complex situations and problems," and I would ask the same of my colleagues. The state expects undergraduates to "analyze and evaluate their own and others' speaking and writing," and I say, that's what my field is all about. The CBHE asks students to "evaluate information for its currency, usefulness, truthfulness, and accuracy," and it's like they're reading my mind. The board wants students to be able to "consider multiple perspectives, recognize biases, deal with ambiguity, and take a reasonable position," and you wonder why I teach Tom Paine? nea

ENDNOTES

[1] "MoSTEP" stands for Missouri Standards for Teacher Education Preparation.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this essay come from the CBHE's "Statewide General Education Policy," available at **www.dhe.mo.gov/mdhecentralgenedtransferpolicy.shtml**.

[3] Nor did the 2001 statewide conference on transfer and articulation, discussed below, justify the need for this reform.

[4] Of course, such classes are also the most likely to be taught by either non-degreed or non-tenure line faculty. My point here is that whoever staffs the classes, those offered in the humanities are at least potentially academic in nature, as opposed to the almost entirely instrumental courses that comprise many students' upper division curricula at schools like UCM.

[5] Clearly we are already at that point. I fear that the CBHE's reform, though, will further accelerate the trend.

[6] Now a component of Oracle specializing in, among other things, "technology infrastructure" and "Human Capital Management," PeopleSoft facilitates exactly the kind of just-in-time procedures that corporatize higher education in part by emphasizing cheap, disposable labor. See their website at **www.peoplesoft.com/corp/en/public_index.jsp**.

[7] "Principles of Good Practice for Transfer & Articulation," adopted by the CBHE June 11, 1998.

[8] "Principles of Good Practice for Transfer & Articulation."

[9] Among the nine-member CBHE during the era described by this account were three real estate agents (all of whom had some teaching experience); two former legislators; a lawyer; an MBA with teaching experience; a speech pathologist; and one career teacher/administrator. Only one of the nine held a Ph.D., and that degree was in—you guessed it—educational administration.