

Crossing Borders as We Teach:  
What Syllabi Suggest about Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education with Students

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"The idea of this course is to apply cutting edge theory to topics in early childhood education."

"This is your class, and I will do anything I can to make this a meaningful and worthwhile learning experience for you."

"A fundamental question of the course is, "How can I be a stronger ally for and with the families of children I teach?" Thus, issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, linguistic and cultural diversity and full inclusion will be emphasized."

What do these quotes from the syllabi of self-identified reconceptualizers mean about how they reconceptualize early childhood education with their students? These statements reflect what participants said about their courses as we discussed syllabi at the most recent Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) Conference in Tempe. At our session on January 7, 2003, participants named three purposes of their courses in early childhood education:

- To help students become critical analyzers of their own culture;
- To examine structures of inequality and how they limit children, understanding the workings to be able to push against them; and
- To look at our role as advocates and change agents.

This paper explores the central question of our conference session: What can syllabi tell us about how members of the reconceptualizing community teach about early childhood education? We are not seeking a list of criteria for the "reconceptualist's

syllabus." In fact, we don't think there is a reconceptualist's syllabus nor do we want a list of criteria for one. Rather, we are looking at each other's work to learn about our teaching and to get ideas from one another. We hope this paper will provoke discussion about some of the key teaching issues that arise as reconceptualizers prepare for courses and present their ideas via syllabi and written materials.

When we talk of "reconceptualizing" we do not want to give the impression of a monolithic entity. Instead we think of a fluid, multifaceted ever-changing set of ideas, as Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) suggest in *Embracing Identities in Early Childhood Education*. Further drawing from Grieshaber and Cannella's work, we regard reconceptualizing early childhood education as an expanding range of perspectives that lead those who think about children and families to contend with complexity and avoid simple answers. Reconceptualizers "...view difference, complexity and even confusion as part of everyday cultural and social life" (Grieshaber & Cannella, p. 9).

Reconceptualizing involves questioning positions and power relations and universally applicable structures and systems, such as child development norms. Our reconceptualizing discussions, full of uncertainties, include the students with whom we learn about families and children; thus, there is mutuality and bidirectionality within our reconceptualizing communities that this paper attempts to investigate further.

The process of reconceptualizing facilitates suspension and querying of beliefs that can lead to a changing worldview. We use the metaphor of a border as a heuristic for considering the positionality of one's belief system. On the other side of that border – perhaps a blurred border that does not polarize two sides, but a metaphorical border nonetheless – reside beliefs that are different from our own. When we cross borders

with students, we go someplace students may not often go or ever go and to which we may or may not usually go. Border crossing may take a class to places where some students live or go often and other students may not. Crossing these borders together enables us to learn about more children and families as well as about each other and about ourselves. Thus crossing borders can lead us toward reconceptualizing our work as teachers both of young children and of adults.

### Background

After a session on reconceptualizing early childhood education with students at the 2001 RECE conference, Joe Tobin suggested a syllabus exchange for the January 2003 conference. His suggestion evolved into the session we conducted at the Tempe conference, whose theme was border crossing. Since a syllabus is an outline or brief statement of the main points of a course, we thought we could learn about teaching as a process of both border crossing and reconceptualization by looking at a number of syllabi together with participants in our session.

Along with some session participants, we recognize that what is on paper does not necessarily reflect what happens in the classroom. The syllabus is not equal to the course. Various constraints and institutional requirements govern the writing of many syllabi. Yet, we also agree with other participants who said, "You can tell a lot from a syllabus. You can see the value of dialogue and discussion and whether it invites talk outside of class about the theoretical notions." So perhaps a syllabus can indeed be a representation of some sort.

With caveats in mind, then, we solicited syllabi from members of the reconceptualizing community in the fall of 2002 with an email message to the 2003

conference list. Unfortunately, our message did not reach everyone, but we nonetheless received eleven syllabi. These syllabi were from four types of courses: introductory, family and community, child development, and issues and trends. To facilitate discussion within our conference session's time frame, we gave each participant a syllabus, first asking groups of participants to work on the same syllabus and then to join other participants who had a different syllabus for the same type of course.

Beforehand we combed the syllabi to see what categories emerged. We found a number of themes and realized that several questions guided us as we examined the syllabi. We offered our questions to the session's participants for their discussion. We shared the themes we found after they were echoed in some of the session's discussion. In the section below, we report on four of the themes we found, blending session participants' comments with our own analyses.

### Themes in Syllabi

Paying attention to our readings of the syllabi, we realize that we focused on what syllabi can communicate about what these reconceptualizers teach, how they teach it, how they know what students are learning, and what the dynamics of power are in their courses. We see the syllabi as rich sources of information about resources and teaching methods. We also have come to regard them as data to mine for indicators of how professors can position themselves and the course material in relation to the students.

#### *What is important to know?*

We assume that syllabi intend to reflect the course content or what students will study. Since professors necessarily select content from a wide range of possibilities, we

also assume that a syllabus indicates, to at least some degree, what the professor believes is important to know. To learn more about what reconceptualizers believe is important for students to know, we considered what in a syllabus reveals the course content. We looked at stated course topics, textbooks and other required and recommended readings listed, and narrative explanations including catalogue descriptions and course objectives. In some instances, course descriptions, seemingly from the catalogue, were followed by a paragraph, apparently written by the professor, which elaborated on or diverged from the previous paragraph.

Reconceptualist educators want their students to consider how the lives of children, families, and schools are situated in historical, political, and social contexts . Many syllabi emphasize, as does the third quote with which we opened this paper, understanding “race, gender, class, sexual orientation, linguistic and cultural diversity, and full inclusion.” This somewhat conventional early childhood anti-bias stance is coupled with a critical lens. As one professor states in a masters level course syllabus, “We will examine issues of power, privilege, pathologizing of persons in poverty, and surveillance”. A doctoral course syllabus states:

Each week we will read a piece of theory, discuss it, and then explore its implications for education in general, more specifically for early childhood education.... Theories to be covered include various versions of post-structuralism, performance theory, queer theory, and postcolonial theory.

Not only graduate course syllabi represent a critical perspective in the content offered in the course. One undergraduate child development course states that the purposes of the course are to, as per the university catalogue, provide students with

information from developmental psychology and, beyond that, to “critique this information from a variety of cultural, disciplinary, historical, and experiential perspectives.”

The freedom professors have to choose their content is affected by whether they are teaching an undergraduate, masters or doctoral course. Several reconceptualizers of undergraduate courses, who do not have the leeway to create courses dedicated to reconceptualizing early childhood education, like the aforementioned professor, present the required course content together with the tools for deconstructing it.

The syllabi listed required and recommended readings from a variety of fields, not just from developmental psychology or specific early childhood education-identified texts. A brief sample of texts includes: Burman's (1994) *Deconstructing developmental psychology*, Paley's (1979) *White teacher*, and Polakow's (1993) *Lives on the edge: Single mothers and their children in the other America*. One syllabus states that the writings of the “reconceptualizing early childhood education group” were central to the course. We found references to work by reconceptualizers such as Ayers, Tobin, O’Loughlin, Canella, and Swadener in many of the syllabi.

Syllabi included narrative accounts, either in novels such as *Beloved* (Morrison 1987) and *Lucy* (Kincaid 1990) or videotapes. Videos shared in class or recommended included: "Billy Elliott," "Paris is Burning," and "It's Elementary." These and other written and visual texts use the arts to allow multiple perspectives and voices to be heard. They go beyond the traditions of developmental psychology to address issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, linguistic and cultural diversity, and full inclusion as well as advocacy.

In the syllabi we reviewed, course content is delivered through field assignments and guest speakers as well as in-class dialogue. Students often work or interact directly with teachers, community activists, children and families either in the classroom or out in the schools. One syllabus stated that

...it is essential that beginning teachers have opportunities to read and study about the diverse contexts of teaching and learning and have practical opportunities to explore these issues in a variety of school settings.

This professor requires an ongoing examination of the nature of oppression, and school placements are one way in which students will have first-hand experiences with social inequality. Most of the syllabi narratives offered the expectation that students “give thought to ways in which schools structure inequality for certain groups, and also think about possible ways to redress these inequalities”.

One final interesting point is that the syllabi authors sometimes present the content to be explored by students in the form of questions. The questions are offered throughout the syllabi as part of the narrative introduction, topic titles, assignments, and themes to consider throughout the course. Questions from syllabi include: "Should the government establish a national family policy and – if so – what should be its intent and features?" "What events in your early childhood... were turning points for you?" and "Who has been helped by dominant concepts of children development, and who has been harmed by these ideas?"

### *How Do Students Come to Know?*

We wondered what experiences Reconceptualist educators would deem important for students, assuming that assignments are experiences that result in learning. Three

findings seemed to emerge from examining course requirements and student performance expectations. The first is that students come to know by investigating new ideas and relating these notions to their own personal experience and interests. Professors asked students to write autobiographies, complete family trees and oral histories, and respond to assigned readings through personal reaction papers and journals. One professor explained, “You will spend a significant amount of time in the first few weeks reflecting on your own life experiences, and the ways in which your experiences as a son or daughter, a sibling, a student in schools, and so on have impacted on your personality and outlook of the world.”

Instructors use weekly writing either in or out of class to reconstruct personal experiences and to better understand self and context. For example,

Your weekly writings will provide a space for you to react both emotionally and intellectually to what you read in the assigned readings, and to what you hear and observe in class each week [i.e., After reading this I felt...; After hearing this I think...; The biggest question in my mind now is...; I was really upset by...].

The purpose of such assignments may be, as one professor stated, to develop a “personal position,” a consciously held and examined philosophical framework (Cuffaro, 1995, as cited in the syllabus).

A second theme we found in all of the syllabi is advocacy. It appears that students at all academic levels should know public policy and current issues that affect schools, families and children. It is not enough to read about the lives of others, students are expected to act on that knowledge by practicing communication “through public channels to constituents and policymakers”. One syllabus reads,

To allow you to test these ideas in the real world I expect you to engage in conversation with people connected with your school ... speak to parents of limited economic means, with students from families of limited economic means, and with professionals who serve an economically needy population. I would like you to talk to these people about the issues we are studying, and seek their input from their perspective.

These educators hope, perhaps, that assignments such as letter writing and thoughtful engagement with individuals who are marginalized may lead to advocacy actions by students.

Lastly, we also noticed that Reconceptualizers present conventional child development theory and curriculum, but ask their students to critique the traditionally held ideas and practices through assignments that call for critical reflection. One syllabus assignment was for a student led discussion in which the group participants were to address the ways in which the course readings specifically challenged dominant child development. Another stated, “you will write 6 critical reaction papers to the required readings in packet” and a “brief critical reaction paper” to the required text. It appears that being “critical” is an important disposition for early childhood reconceptualists; however, we could not find a definition or explanation for students on how one gains and, perhaps more important, represents a critical lens through assignments.

### *How Do Professors Know What Students Are Learning?*

Discussion during the RECE conference session devoted a considerable amount of time to assessment and grading and these issues naturally appeared in every syllabus

we saw. Striving for congruence with their expressed belief systems – often stated within the syllabi – reconceptualist professors aimed for democratic assessment. They included student voices in their classes and counted students' participation in their grades. They graded assignments that make learning processes evident to learner and teacher alike, such as reflections on readings, rather than grading only the products of learning. Related to that, they assessed students with assignments in which students take an active role. And, in some cases, instructors include the students as self-evaluators.

In keeping with the post-structuralist notion of knowing from within rather than from outside of what is to be known (Usher & Edwards 1994), the syllabi we examined show the value of student voice by counting participation along with written or oral products in the grades these professors give the students. In fact, the doctoral course is the only one of the eleven whose syllabi we reviewed in which preparation, attendance, and participation do not explicitly count as part of the grade.

One must, of course, be in class to co-construct ideas about children, families, and schools with the rest of the class. In addition to valuing student voice, a professor who believes that knowledge is socially constructed by each learner as part of a community of learners (Richardson, 1999) would want everyone to be present for that to happen.

The focus on students' participation extends to an emphasis in the syllabi on making students' learning processes as obvious as possible to the student and instructor. Professors in the courses whose syllabi we reviewed assess how students process what they read. As indicated earlier, most of the courses we reviewed require papers or journal entries in which students connect their reflections on past experience and/or present observations to their reading for the class.

In most of the syllabi we reviewed, instructors assess student learning, at least in part, based on evidence of students' construction of knowledge through activities in which they participate and then discuss. When students write about local programs or document other projects, they reflect upon them as well as doing them. They often perform tasks they will do as teachers; they write curriculum plans, develop activities, review materials, or conduct advocacy, such as writing a letter to the editor or making a family budget typical of a family living in poverty, and generally accompany these activities with reflective analysis.

Assessments do not always engage students' reflection to the same degree. One class requires students to apply state standards to their work, and in a very large class students are assessed by a midterm and a final exam. Still, in every syllabus we reviewed, student learning is at some point assessed through the students' active engagement with course material, writing a personal philosophy statement, analyzing policy, or reporting on their research on racism. In three of the eleven classes, students are required to present material to the rest of the class, in one instance conducting the class discussion.

Most of the syllabi we reviewed do not state grading criteria explicitly, instead giving the number of points awarded for each requirement. Here is an exception:

Papers will be graded rigorously on content, written expression [proofread and check grammar!] and your ability to use sources thoughtfully to support your argument. Please use quotes, footnotes, and references as appropriate. Try to develop an original argument, and demonstrate your ability to engage the topic critically. I recommend that you also use sources from at least three relevant websites to support your argument."

And from the same syllabus,

These papers will be evaluated for clarity and thoughtfulness. In them you should try to demonstrate your ownership over the core ideas you have studied in class and your ability to analyze, discuss and apply these issues. However, please use the active voice and try to make your papers personal and interesting. Please provide relevant references or footnotes and edit your paper for clarity, grammar and punctuation. Papers should go through successive drafts before a final draft is turned in. If you need writing assistance or other accommodations, please see me as soon as possible, or as soon as you begin to encounter difficulties.

In this undergraduate course, the professor gives direction, letting the students know the expectations so they can succeed in meeting them.

Assessment of students' work is an exercise in power. Positioning of professor and students and questions related to power are most evident in the syllabi when the syllabi spell out grading requirements. Power may be shared somewhat through clarity about course expectations and requirements, an effort to avoid mystifying or deceiving students, and being transparent about grading and evaluation.

Another way in which a class may become somewhat democratic is for a syllabus to have a provision for student self-evaluation. One instructor's syllabi had such a provision. In those classes students write a narrative that concludes with the grade they believe they have earned along with an explanation of their absences. If their self-evaluation is more than one-third of a grade different from the professor's assessment of their work, they speak to the professor about it. This professor has found some students' backgrounds lead them to say, "Give me a lower grade. I could always do better."

*What about power relations?*

With these thoughts about power relations in mind, we wondered what else reconceptualists' syllabi revealed about how they manage their power conscientiously. Other aspects of the syllabi besides assessment guidelines gave us some indications about how instructors position themselves with regard to students and the power relations inherent in classes. We looked at instances where a syllabus referred to the difference in positions of student and instructor, at the language and tone instructors used in the syllabi, at the rules they made, and at the information they provided.

The passive voice seems to be endemic to syllabus writing style. Yet on some infrequent occasions in the group of syllabi we reviewed, the instructors use the active voice. When they do, the instructor steps forward and claims her or his position.

Consider this example:

If any of our sessions are not meeting your needs, or if you are experiencing anxiety or distress, or if you need special accommodations, please speak with me. I will be happy to make any adjustments I can. If you feel that the group as a whole could benefit from hearing of your concern, please feel free to raise the issue for the entire group.

Here, the instructor is clearly the one who can change the class sessions, provide special accommodations, and make adjustments. This instructor recognizes that power – not equally held by the students – and proposes to use it to students' benefit.

Active voice establishes relationship and also conveys less formality than does the passive voice. The welcome message at the start of several syllabi we reviewed ("Welcome to [this class]!") also communicates warmth and can give students the sense

that a real person is at the other end of the syllabus. Obviously, too, the professor is welcoming the student to her or his space.

The choice of language in a syllabus can sound more or less collegial, narrowing or widening the gap between professor and student. In this selection from one of the syllabi, for example, the instructor seems to address the students as colleagues:

The seminar will function as a reading group for the first two-thirds of the semester, and then switch to a writing group.

This excerpt is from a doctoral seminar. Need undergraduate courses have a less collegial tone? This instructor of undergraduates uses this paragraph in all syllabi:

This class will be taught through discussion and dialogue. Ample opportunity will be provided for students to raise questions, share stories, and learn collaboratively, in our learning community. This is your class, and I will do anything I can to make this a meaningful, and worthwhile learning experience for you. Since much of the learning in class will occur through the activities that occur in class, it is essential that you attend class, and that you take the responsibility of being prepared for class by having done the necessary reading and writing. Details on readings, assignments, and evaluation processes are below.

Lodged in this paragraph is a kind of contract, drawn up by the professor. It is the students' class, and the professor is available to make it work for them. Yet the students have a responsibility to fulfill, and the professor outlines the subsequent rules for students to follow.

Sometimes the rules laid out by instructors serve to position the students to lead the class. In a very large undergraduate child development class, a reconceptualizer lectures about theories for the first half of the term after which time the class follows these guidelines from the syllabus:

Each student will be placed with a group of other students to lead a large group discussion of a particular reading. The discussion should last approximately 45-60 minutes and must involve the entire class in:

- examining the specific content of the reading;
- addressing the ways the reading content specifically challenges dominant child development (e.g. specific examples of contradictory experience, gendered experiences);
- exploring how the reading can be used to broaden our views of the multiple life experiences of human beings in ways that provide more people with increased life opportunities; and
- questions that **AVOID** the construction of power for one group over another.

The instructor designed the plan using power vested in the professor, but the plan is for students to take power and facilitate discussion.

Power is shared additionally as instructors provide information to students. Making goals explicit, for example, gives students knowledge that enables them to share in the direction the course takes. When this professor writes in a syllabus:

A goal of the course is to maximize relevance to participants' practice by discussing current issues facing early childhood educators and other professionals,

while strengthening advocacy skills for addressing these issues. Another goal is to build community within this two-year master's cohort group. students can gauge the degree to which those goals are achieved and speak out if they are not.

### Concluding Thoughts

Syllabi are short, sometimes prescribed formats, which may include material not generated by the professor. As we looked at the syllabi we received, we began to see ways in which some reconceptualists work within these constraints to make the essence of the course known to students.

Whether or not courses were dictated by catalogue descriptions and state requirements, the courses whose syllabi we reviewed focus on the historical, social, and political contexts that affect children and families' lives (Cannella & Grieshaber, 2001). They promote advocacy in a variety of ways, and they invite critique, although it is not always clear from the syllabi precisely how students become societal critics. These themes take students and instructors across borders through the coursework.

Both the form and the content of the syllabi we reviewed communicate that students reconceptualize early childhood education in these courses. The readings and videos, the topics covered, the stated purposes, and the class activities and course assignments all promote reconceptualizing. So does the language of the syllabus. Questions invite engagement, and active voice and informal word choice and sentence structure break barriers and realign power positions.

This paper, the session it reflects, and our work with eleven syllabi is only a beginning. We hope to continue this work with many more syllabi to more fully

understand what they can tell us about early childhood teacher education practice among reconceptualizers. If you are willing to allow us to review your syllabi, please send them to one or both of us at the above email addresses.

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