

This Syllabus Is For You: Enhancing Student Engagement and Inclusivity through Zines

Dr. Anna Marie LaChance, University of Massachusetts Amherst

www.ThatAnnaMarie.com

This Syllabus Is For You: Enhancing Student Engagement and Inclusivity through Zines

Abstract

The purpose of this WIP research paper is to demonstrate the ways that instructors can turn an under-utilized element of their course, the syllabus, into a novel pedagogical tool. Instructors regularly bemoan the fact that students rarely "read the syllabus", which is usually a text-heavy technical document which students only engage with on Day One of the course. In this paper, I describe how I take inspiration from Dr. Carmen Kynard's concept of a zine syllabus to engage students throughout an undergraduate engineering course.

Zines are small-batch, self-published "magazines", usually made by hand and then photocopied by an individual or small group. They have their roots in fanzines, self-published comics made in the pre-Internet days, but they're also rooted in queer, punk, and feminist knowledge-sharing practices. Zines are a medium that deliberately subverts traditional publishing with DIY aesthetics and information not typically found in traditional news outlets, such as survival strategies for marginalized peoples. With this medium, we can subvert the typical academic text and provide course information that is most valuable to students, particularly to those with diverse learning styles.

Here, I discuss the use of zines as the course syllabi in my undergraduate Process Dynamics and Control course. In addition to the usual information found in a syllabus (the course description, lecture times, statements on Title IX, etc.), students can find tips on how to succeed in the course, resources for mental health or other basic necessities, affirmations that they're doing a great job in the course, space to doodle, and so much more. As prior research on graphic syllabi shows, the use of colorful visual aids in the syllabus fosters a more creative and dynamic learning environment, serves as an accessibility feature, and adds a necessary personal touch to what is often a very dry document. For example, the university-mandated statement on academic dishonesty is accompanied with personal messages from the instructor about what academic honesty means to them, and the statement on academic accommodation sits beside a visualization of engineers with disability aids to remind students that their disabilities are not only tolerated but embraced. The syllabus also contains a complete equation sheet, including tables of Laplace transforms and other useful correlations, which students use on their homework or quizzes. Thus, the syllabus zine is an engaging document that serves as a "field guide" to the course that they keep returning to all semester, a resource made with love that students can literally keep in their back pocket to reference when they're in need of critical resources.

1. Introduction and Background

The purpose of this WIP research paper is to demonstrate the ways that instructors can turn an under-utilized element of their course, the syllabus, into a novel pedagogical tool. Here, I describe my experience with handing out my course syllabus for an undergraduate chemical engineering process control course in the form of a zine and share the results of a small pilot study on syllabus zines carried out in the Fall 2025 semester. Theories on the syllabus as a document that reinforces pedagogical norms—and thus is a site for both epistemic violence and radical possibility—are presented.

The completed zines will be handed out in-person at the 2026 ASEE Annual Conference and are available to read and print at: www.ThatAnnaMarie.com/zines

1.1 Please Read the Syllabus

Across higher education, one of the most common complaints voiced from instructors is that not enough students are reading the course syllabus. “*If only they would, they would know how to succeed in the course!*” we bemoan, forgetting that many students see the document as a sterile list of basic course information and a list of topics with dates that are seldom held to. This inherently begs the question, “If we want students to read the syllabus, why not make the syllabus engaging, fun even?”

A 2010 study found that when presented with two hypothetical course syllabi, one which was barebones and one which was rich with information, students rated the latter teacher as more likely to have better teaching skills; in other words, an interesting syllabus signals that the teacher is competent. [1] Additionally, a 2024 study highlights how syllabi can be vessels for changing campus climate by promoting inclusivity, indicating that students respond well to the inclusion of gender pronouns, inclusivity statements, and works including authors from underrepresented authors. [2] Interestingly, this work—carried out at WPI but representing both STEM and non-STEM courses—found that while 77% of students believe the syllabus is an important document, those who do not see it as important describe it as “superfluous” and “obsolete”, mostly due to the ever-shifting nature of course information and the existence of the learning management system (LMS).

Much ink has also been spilled about the syllabus as a site of cultural reproduction that can potentially lead to harm. As Sulik and Keys write, “syllabi (re)socialize students for success in the college setting by establishing student-teacher roles and norms and setting the tone for classroom interactions.” [3] In line with the idea that the syllabus imposes a first impression of an instructor onto the student, Savaria and Monteiro describe the syllabus as an important form of student-faculty engagement; using a critical discourse analysis, they found that engineering syllabi contained “limited to no inclusion of: student learning course outcomes, connections to topics outside of engineering, encouragement of faculty-student or peer relationships, personal growth and societal impacts, or acknowledgement of the underrepresentation of women in STEM.” [4] By failing to nurture faculty-student relationships, nurture student-student relationships, feature references to diverse authors, provide straightforward recommendations on how to succeed in a class, or provide a strong stance on discrimination, this “first impression”

stands to uphold the myth of objectivity and colorblindness in STEM, the usual magic tricks of white supremacy and patriarchy [5], leaving marginalized students at the whim of the “invisible curriculum”. More plainly, syllabi lacking in such information is a means by which instructors reproduce STEM values, as if to say, “these statements must not be important if they’re nowhere to be found in what is supposed to be a sacred document.”

1.2 Creative Syllabi & Radical Possibility

One possible subversion of the syllabus as a dry, unhelpful document lacking in human connection is to inject it with creativity. Countless studies have been done on how to make the syllabus more student-centered [6], with one robust metric outlined by Richmond, et al. [7] Here, learner-centeredness was evaluated on the factors of community building (accessibility of the teacher, learning rationale, and guidelines for collaboration); power and control (whether students had a role in determining the course policies, whether students were encouraged to bring outside learning materials into the class, whether the syllabus has a collaborative or punitive tone, and discussion of learning outcomes over policies and procedures); and evaluation (including the grading scheme, feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for revising or resubmitting work). Building on this framework with the above ideas about deliberate inclusiveness and intentionally subverting white supremacist STEM norms, a vision for the ideal syllabus starts to come into focus.

One interesting approach has been the use of graphic syllabi, essentially a more visual medium for organizing course information. In their 2003 article on the subject, Biktimirov and Nilson identify many benefits to graphic syllabi over its traditional counterpart, including “reaching nonverbal learning styles”, improving knowledge retention [contrasting the “semantic (verbal) and episodic (visual and experimental)” forms of long-term memory], concise presentation, and encouraging creativity in students. [8] Many instructors across disciplines from soil science [9] to sociology [10] have adopted this style, noting that students generally prefer the graphic syllabus to the traditional. More than just a means of hacking student brains by activating their long-term memory, the graphic syllabus holds potential for a radical subversion of the traditional expectation of what documents count as a “legitimate” form of knowledge production in deeply colonial and patriarchal STEM disciplines. [11]

1.3 The Zine Syllabus

By the simplest definition, zines (short for fanzines) are small-batch, self-published booklets, usually produced via photocopy and distributed at a local level. However, this definition hardly enshrines the political weight of zines; to quote Nina Nijsten’s 2020 Diary Comic, the zine is “also situated within DIY culture. This means it is non-profit, non-commercial, low-budget, and non-competitive”. [12] Zines are made by and for marginalized peoples specifically to provide connection and information by circumventing (subverting, even) traditional publishing; in the 1980s, gay activists made zines about how to survive the HIV/AIDS crisis, and today, zines on the importance of wearing face masks, how to donate e-sims to people in Gaza, and the nuances of intersectional identity appear in political spaces over the world. Alison Piepmeier, who teaches a college course about zines, wrote about the importance of the medium at length in 2008, noting the importance of their materiality: “By mobilizing particular human qualities,

including vulnerability, affection, and pleasure...zines leverage their materiality into a kind of surrogate physical interaction and offer mechanisms for creating meaningful relationships.” [13] Contrasted with the “liquid syllabus”, which is a form of graphic syllabus that usually takes the form of an interactive website, zines are rooted in the physical world and have an embedded history of DIY knowledge-sharing practices. With the physical nature of zines in mind, could this be ultimate deviation from a digital .PDF file coldly delivered to students via the LMS? Could the deliberately “informal” medium of zines be a step towards forming genuine relationships with students, making our intentions clear from day one of the course?

I am by no means the first to deliver my syllabus to students in the form of a zine. I first heard of this practice from Dr. Carmen Kynard, Professor of English at Texas Christian University, when she appeared on an episode of the Abolition Science podcast. [14] Here, the syllabus zine is positioned as an abolitionist, Black feminist teaching practice, “an invitation to be a part of this process, this knowledge creation process”, and “a toolkit to all this experiences that we were having in the classroom...and also beyond the classroom.” The host of the show, one of Dr. Kynard’s former students, shares that through the zine they were “introduced to a possibility of what could exist within the space and beyond the space.” [14]

Pouring over Dr. Kynard’s syllabus for her 2022 course, ““Word is BOND”: An Introduction to Black rhetoric and Language for Undergraduate Students” [15], one is struck by the extensive use of visuals not only to get across course concepts, but course policies. A flag carrying the message “DISABILITY IS NOT A BAD WORD” accompanies her accommodations statement; a note on pronouns and pronunciations is not haphazardly copy-pasted from the mandatory University syllabus guidelines but emblazed in black and purple; graffiti is enshrined as highly relevant course material. In potentially the most striking difference between the traditional course and this one, students are instructed to carry the syllabus with them throughout the semester; the zine is filled to the brim with reading lists, course concepts, learning objectives, and resources, and space is provided for students to write down their passwords for the course website. Rather than an “obsolete” document that gets abandoned by students after the first week of the course, the zine acts as a sort of field guide to the semester, an interactive document that students return to over and over again. As a queer, feminist, punk form of knowledge sharing, starting the semester with a core course document in the form of a zine subverts dominant narratives about what an engineering document should be and provides an opportunity for establishing an inclusive atmosphere. The zine syllabus can also be a case study in student-centered pedagogy, complete with mental health and accessibility resources.

This paper describes my attempts at a syllabus zine for an undergraduate chemical engineering course, as well as my suggestions for instructors looking to make one for themselves. By turning the course syllabus into a document that engages students, acts as a learning resource for the entirety of the semester, establishes strong connections between students and faculty, and challenges academic publishing norms, instructors can use zines to create an inclusive and impactful learning experience starting from day one of their class. I aim to specifically address the ECSJ pillars of “the classroom as a terrain of struggle and site of possibility” and “grounding in movement and lineages of organizing” by demonstrating new forms of student inclusion and by highlighting the ways in which engineers can take inspiration from the communication mediums of social justice movements.

2. Methods

For a Process Control course for 41 undergraduate Seniors in chemical engineering during the Fall 2025 semester, two syllabi were offered. An online version of the syllabus was available on Canvas, the course LMS, and a zine version was also given to students in person on the first day of class. Students were specifically instructed to keep the zine on their person, and the zine included (among other features listed below) a complete equation sheet that they were to use during otherwise closed-note quizzes. Both syllabi were created by me.

To determine student preferences around the use of zine syllabi, especially compared to the online version of the syllabus, a brief Qualtrics survey was administered at the end of the Fall 2025 semester (IRB # 007325). The complete survey items are listed in the Appendix. One set of questions related to the frequency with which students accessed the Zine syllabus (the one handed to them on the first day of class) and the Online syllabus (the version posted to Canvas LMS) throughout the semester, specifically asking which resources from the syllabus were accessed. These items used a 6-point frequency scale ranging from “Never” to “Daily or almost daily”. Another set of questions asked about their behaviors and preferences regarding the use of zines, including an open-ended item. These items used a 6-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree, N/A). In addition to these descriptive, quantitative items, an open-ended exploratory item was included for participants to write at length about their experiences with the zine. 41 participants, the entirety of the Fall 2025 Process Control course, were anonymously recruited during lecture and via email. Responses from $n=28$ participants were ultimately used after data cleaning, which solely involved removing responses that selected “No” on the survey consent item.

3. Early Attempts

Fittingly, my first syllabus zine was made in collaboration with a student, who was of course credited in this 2021 zine and all future syllabus zines. As a queer, trans graduate student I wondered how I could establish a voice in the pedagogical innovation spaces. More importantly, I wondered how I could humanize engineering education to make it more broadly accessible, especially to marginalized groups. The premise of turning a syllabus into an interactive zine was electric, so I took the idea to one of my undergraduate research assistants at the time, Nia Samuels, a young Black woman with a penchant for both art and activism. I came to her with my ideas for what a syllabus zine could include, and she contributed her own: as a student, she often felt like she didn’t know how she was doing in the course, so what if there was a grade calculator right there on the page? Also, students are always stressed about their grades, so what if the syllabus had affirmations that grades aren’t everything and that they’re doing a good job? As someone who hadn’t taken an undergraduate course in years, I hadn’t thought of these before. Let this be the first lesson for readers: if you want to make something that’s for students, have students help make it! In the immortal words of disability rights activist James Charlton, “nothing about us without us”.

Together, we designed the syllabus for an undergraduate chemical engineering Unit Operations course for seniors, which I had the responsibility of teaching in Fall 2021. Using the prior instructor’s syllabus as a starting point, we added the following elements...

1. An “Unofficial Course Description”: Aside from the “official” course description listed during course selection, a student-friendly, “what does this really mean” version of the course description is provided, along with a congratulatory welcome to Senior Year. This is also where I credit my student collaborator and Dr. Kynard for inspiring the syllabus. (#CiteBlackWomen)
2. A detailed course introduction: A few pages on how we define a “unit operation”, a “process simulation”, and more, all with visuals of course! The cover art for the zine, which reveals a full process flow diagram when the zine is unfolded, was also made by the student.
3. A visual guide on how to use the course software, in this case Aspen Plus (see Figure 1).
4. Tips for success: Featuring doodles from my student collaborator, which she called “Squishies” since they resembled 3D characters flattened into 2D geometric shapes, the syllabus interjects with advice such as how to save your online work, how to start homework early, and more, providing advice from one student to another (see Figure 1).
5. Environmental justice art & opportunities for co-teaching: In my course, I provided students who are passionate about climate change as a social issue the opportunity to teach a module of the course (1 week worth of material) on environmental justice as it pertains to chemical engineering.
6. A grade calculator, including an affirmation that “You are worth more than your grades”, another student doodle (see Figure 1).
7. A complete list of learning objectives with very specific instructions on how to submit assignments in the class. I left no “invisible curriculum” so that students could avoid getting points off for no reason.
8. Statements and visuals regarding accessibility: Like Dr. Kynard, I wanted to get across the message that it’s okay to ask for help and take breaks as needed. So, in addition to the mandatory accommodations statement, I included a personal message about acceptable ways to show up for the course when your body couldn’t make it that day. Included here is a graphic showing off diverse disabled bodies.
9. A Land Acknowledgement, DEI Statement, and Gender Identities statement: My attempt at normalizing such statements in my field.
10. Space to take notes and write self-affirmations: If the document is truly “for students”, it should include opportunities for students to interact with it and make it their own.

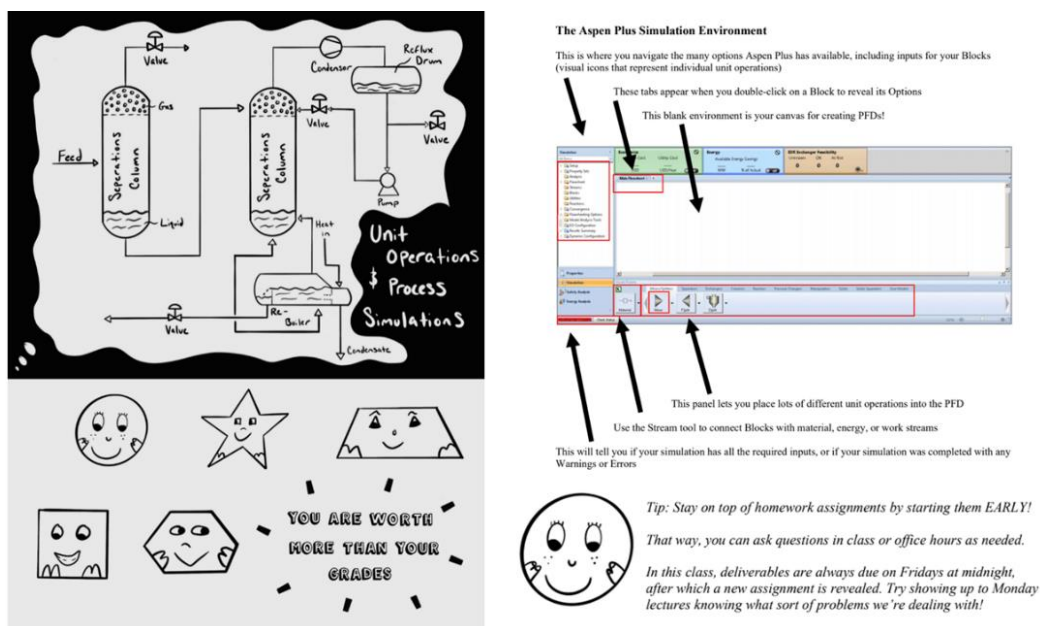


Figure 1. Snippets from the Fall 2021 Zine. Top left: zine cover art. Bottom left: “Squishy” characters which provide students with advice. Top right: a tour through the Aspen Plus interface. Bottom right: an example of advice given to students.

For this first attempt, the goal of the syllabus was to a) be beautiful, or at least stand in the lineage with the DIY aesthetics of zine culture to the degree that Microsoft Word would let me, b) be useful to students in their day-to-day lives as they prepare for lectures, complete their homework, etc. and c) be interactive, engaging, and affirming to all students that they belong in engineering.

4. Improved Versions

Now as a faculty member, I’m teaching an entirely different course, but I’ve kept the premise of a syllabus zine. In addition to prior elements, the following have added over the past 4 years...

1. A complete health resource list: Intentionally placed in the Centerfold, the easiest page of the booklet to access due to the bending of the pages, this page features a table of all the various on-campus resources that a student would need. Whether a student needs food, housing, a sexual assault hotline, or a mental health check-in, it’s right here. Also included is a quote from bell hooks and space for students to write down who they might want to talk to if they’re feeling stressed (see Figure 2).
2. A complete equation sheet, with space to add more: the last few pages of the zine have nearly every relevant equation or table they need. I allow students to bring their zine to quizzes, even if they doodle inside of it. By giving the students everything they need to succeed in the course, withholding no secrets, we can start to break down the usual instructor-student power dynamic.
3. Practical cover art: As students learn partway through the semester, the front and back of the zine are useful references as well. The front cover shows the types of process responses, ranging from critically damped to undamped, and the back cover shows the same feedback control loop in time domain and Laplace domain notation (see Figure 3).

- QR codes to get to course website and other important resources: Since this is a physical document, there should be a way for students to easily jump to the LMS if needed.
- Easter eggs: To encourage students to read their syllabus carefully, and to add a bit of fun to the course, there is a section that instructs students to email me a photo of a cat for 5 bonus points on any homework assignment.
- A statement on the use of Generative AI: This became required after Fall 2022, for obvious reasons.
- Aesthetics: more visuals, a better layout, hot pink hyperlinks, and more rainbows (lining the bottom of each page are various sine waves made with MATLAB, the software students use in class, colored using the exact hex codes of the LGBT Pride flag).

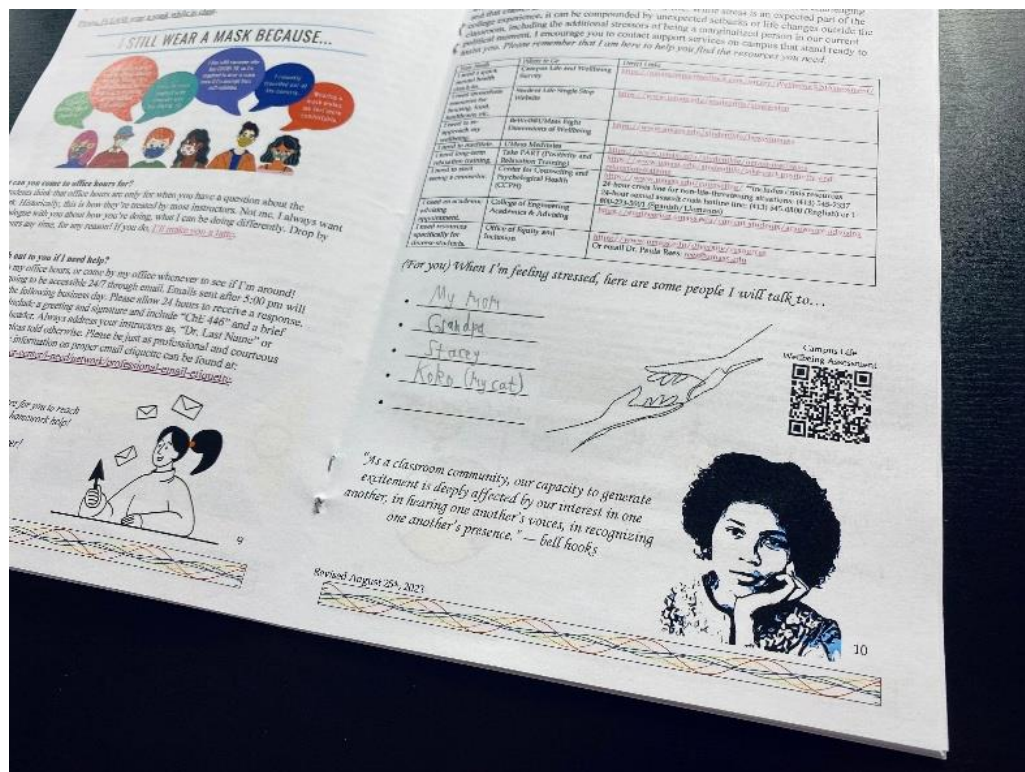


Figure 2. Zine centerfold with student health resources

ChE 446 Process Control Fall 2025

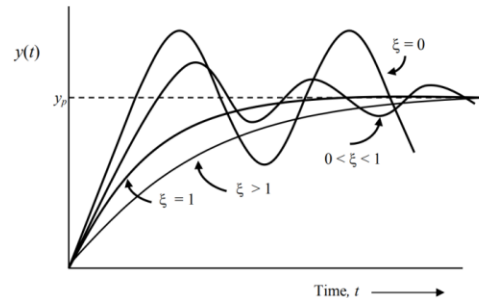
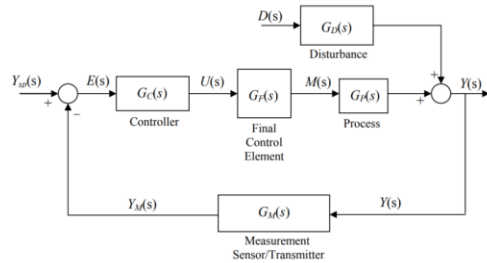
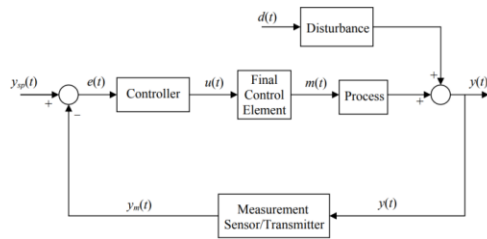


Figure 3. Zine cover art featuring relevant reference figures.

This syllabus, much like this course, is for you. It is your guide to the course, a physical document that you can keep with you and return to throughout the semester. It includes tips for how to succeed in this course, equation sheets, space to doodle, affirmations, and so much more. The most updated version of this syllabus will be available on Canvas, where you can also find all the other course content (Lecture slides, Simulink tutorials, and other resources).

The idea for a zine syllabus was inspired by the work of Dr. Carmen Kynard, a Professor of English at Texas Christian University. In 2021, I co-designed my first zine for my Unit Operations class with Nia Samuels, a chemical engineer, artist, and activist who I mentored for many years. I hope it inspires you to be creative and commit to self-care while taking this course!

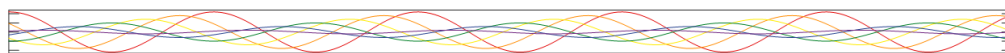
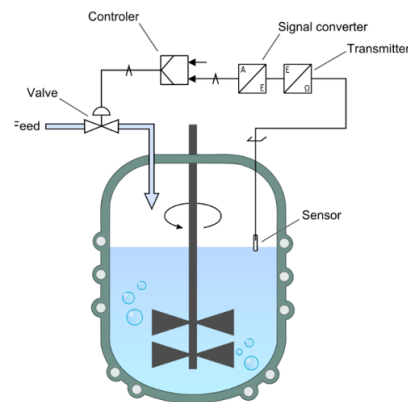
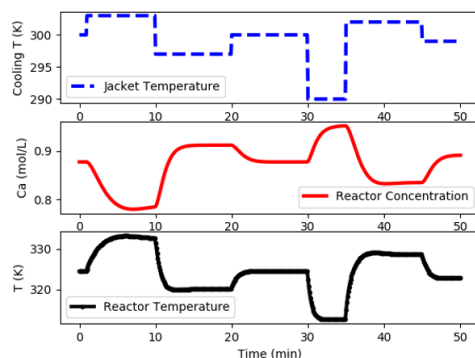


Figure 4. Left: Inside cover which explains the purpose of the syllabus zine. Right: A complete list of affirmations and advice from me to my students.

5. Student Reception (Pilot Study)

To get a baseline view of how students perceive the zine syllabus practice and to assess the frequency of its use compared to the online version of the syllabus, a brief survey was administered at the end of the Fall 2025 semester. Specifically, students were asked with what regularity they accessed both versions of the syllabus in general, as well as different sections of the documents: Course Description & Learning Goals; Course Policies (e.g., Grading, Extension Policy); Course Schedule (Deadlines, Lecture Schedule); Submission Requirements for Assignments (Homework, Project); Statements on Academic Integrity, GenAI, Accessibility, Title XI, etc.; Mental Health & Support Resources; and the Equation Sheet.

Before getting to the differences between the zine and online editions of their syllabus, students were asked a baseline question: “In general, how often do you consult syllabi in your courses?” This was to shed light on student behavior independently of this class, where they had multiple options to access the syllabus. Here, 0 students reported that they “never” consult the syllabi in their other courses, but 2 reported “Once or twice per semester”, 11 reported “About once or twice a month”, 10 reported “About once a week”, 2 reported “Several times per week”, and 0 reported “Daily or almost daily”. Obviously, this reflects a wide range of approaches to syllabus reading; these are Senior undergraduate students who have taken many courses, including courses where the syllabus is rarely used by the instructor after week one and courses where the syllabus contains detailed schedule of events or assignments. Still, the fact that a majority of students reported checking their syllabi at least once a month challenges the commonly held (adversarial) attitude among faculty that students “never read the syllabus”.

In general, students accessed course resources more frequently on the zine edition than they did on the online edition (see Table 1). Sensibly, almost nobody checked their syllabus “several times per week” or “daily”. 4 students shared that they “never” looked at the online syllabus during the entire semester, likely because they had another option in this case (the zine). A much larger number of students claimed to have never looked at the online syllabus for the course learning goals, schedule, statements on GenAI, and more, indicating that the zine format may have made these resources more accessible to students.

Far more zine-readers were reviewing the course learning goals (5 vs 12 “Never”, 15 vs 10 “Once or twice this semester”, 2 vs 0 “Several times per week). Since the zine edition was used for in-person, closed-book quizzes as an equation sheet, the number of students checking the zine for equations was obviously very high and the number of students checking the online syllabus for equations was very low. Additionally, while quizzes were held roughly monthly, most students checked the equation sheets “about once a week” or “several times per week”, indicating that they are using the zine as a regular study tool, possibly to complete homework assignments as well. Curiously, the number of students accessing mental health and support resources was still low, though one student accessed them daily via zine, and three students accessed them monthly via zine; while not a complete mental health revolution, for these few students, the zine may have potentially been critical at connecting them to such resources. The increased engagement with the syllabus when in zine form shows that the classroom is still a site

of possibility for radical possibility, that in-class activities and assignments are not the only tools instructors can use to improve student learning outcomes and sense of belonging.

One notable exception where students accessed the online version more than the zine was the course schedule. This can be in flux for a number of reasons including snow days or Murphy's Law, making the schedule on the LMS always more accurate. Submission requirements for homework assignments are also evenly matched between the zine and online versions, likely as students submit work through the LMS and thus are a mere click away (they also may desire the most accurate version of the submission requirements in case they have somehow changed).

Table 1. Number of students ($n=28$) reporting frequency of Zine Syllabus access (standard font) and Online Syllabus access (*italic font*) by syllabus section.

Frequency of Access	The Document in General	Course Description & Learning Goals	Course Policies (e.g., Grading, Extension Policy)	Course Schedule (Deadlines, Lecture Schedule)	Submission Requirements for Assignments (Homework, Project)	Statements on Academic Integrity, GenAI, Accessibility, Title XI, etc.	Mental Health & Support Resources	Equation Sheet
Never	0 (zine) <i>4 (online)</i>	5 <i>12</i>	3 <i>7</i>	7 <i>10</i>	7 <i>9</i>	13 <i>21</i>	17 <i>19</i>	0 <i>14</i>
Once or twice total this semester	2 <i>7</i>	15 <i>10</i>	8 <i>7</i>	7 <i>5</i>	9 <i>7</i>	13 <i>5</i>	7 <i>7</i>	0 <i>4</i>
About once a month	13 <i>12</i>	5 <i>5</i>	14 <i>12</i>	7 <i>8</i>	8 <i>6</i>	1 <i>0</i>	3 <i>0</i>	9 <i>7</i>
About once a week	11 <i>5</i>	1 <i>1</i>	3 <i>2</i>	7 <i>5</i>	4 <i>6</i>	1 <i>2</i>	0 <i>1</i>	11 <i>2</i>
Several times per week	2 <i>0</i>	2 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	6 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	8 <i>1</i>
Daily or almost daily	0 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	1 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>	1 <i>0</i>	0 <i>0</i>

In a series of Likert-scale questions, students shared more about their zine use behavior and general preferences (Table 2). These were asked to more directly ascertain how students are using the zine and how it might be improved in the future. In general, students responded favorably to the zine, taking advantage of space to write notes and finding course resources more easily. Many even indicated that they found the zine visually appealing and, if given the choice between a “normal” printed syllabus on 8.5” by 11” paper and the provided folded zine, would choose the zine, demonstrating that these benefits are not solely attributable to the document being physical rather than digital. Most felt that the provided equation sheet was sufficient to help them answer quiz questions, though some found there to be not enough space for self-written equations, indicating that more blank space may be needed.

Some students highlighted areas for improvement as well as fundamental limitations to the zine format. Compared to the 2021 Unit Operations zine which featured interactive elements such as a grade tracker, the 2025 zine had few of these elements as they were cut to save space. Also, when students inevitably lost the copy given to them on the first day of class, some struggled to

find a new copy of the zine. (New copies were made offered during quizzes and were always available in a basket on my office door, but perhaps this could have been communicated better.) Finally, a few found it distracting to have the entirety of the course policies available to them during quizzes, indicating that it could be important to offer students a simple, “syllabus-free” equation sheet during quizzes.

Table 2. Number of responses to various questions about the syllabus zine.

Survey Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	N/A
I wrote notes or annotated the zine (quiz formulas, reminders, highlights).	1	1	2	3	21	0
I completed interactive activities in the zine (e.g., scanning QR codes, making a mental health plan).	12	3	6	3	1	3
While on campus, I kept the zine on my person most of the time.	3	1	3	8	12	1
The zine encouraged me to look up course information more often than I would for an online-only syllabus.	4	2	9	7	5	1
Having the equation sheet in the same document made me reference the rest of the syllabus more often.	2	1	4	10	11	0
The zine made it easier to find the information I needed.	1	0	5	13	8	1
I found the zine visually appealing.	0	2	6	6	12	1
When I lost my zine, it was difficult to get a new one from the instructor.	14	4	2	2	2	6
If given a physical copy of a course syllabus in future courses, I would prefer the smaller zine format to a standard-size (8.5”x11”).	3	3	4	6	11	1
I used the free space to write my own equations to help me on the quizzes.	1	0	1	3	23	0
The equation sheet had most of the tools I needed for my assignments.	0	2	2	12	12	0
The zine did not include enough space for my own equations.	7	8	8	4	1	0
Having access to the rest of the syllabus content during quizzes was distracting.	8	8	4	5	2	0

In the open-ended portion of the survey, participants were able to share any other comments they had about the zine syllabus and propose features that could be added to make it more useful to them. Only 6 participants used this open-ended section, 4 of whom simply noted that more blank space should be provided for self-written equations (see Figure 5 for an example of a used zine

with self-written equations). One student requested more completed example problems to be included with an allusion to being a visual learner (“Maybe more visuals examples in it”).

Crucially, the zine format should never be the only option by which students can access course resources. In one open-ended response, a student wrote extensively about their distaste for the zine. Naming the environmental issue of high paper use and an apparent social pressure to not lose their copy: “I would much rather have made my own equation sheet before quizzes.” “[When losing a copy of the zine] I felt guilty getting a new one, as the professor had to reprint them in color. (Expensive, kills trees.)” The same student did not find the zine helpful as a study tool compared to online course materials (“...it is easier to reference the slides or textbook for info. The syllabus just has equations, whereas the slides and textbook had explanations alongside equations, which I found to be easier to understand.”) While this is just one student’s perspective, it serves as an excellent summary of the ways the zine syllabus format could be altered to accommodate the most students: 1) use clear communication about how the zine ought to be used and how to access new copies; 2) offer more free space on the zine for self-written equations and other forms of creative self-expression; 3) provide alternatives during assessment such as simple equation sheets, particularly for neurodiverse students who may struggle to focus on the zine’s equation sheet during quizzes; and 4) address accessibility concerns by avoiding dense text in the zine and having a WCAG-compliant online syllabus (and other course materials) available to students at all times.

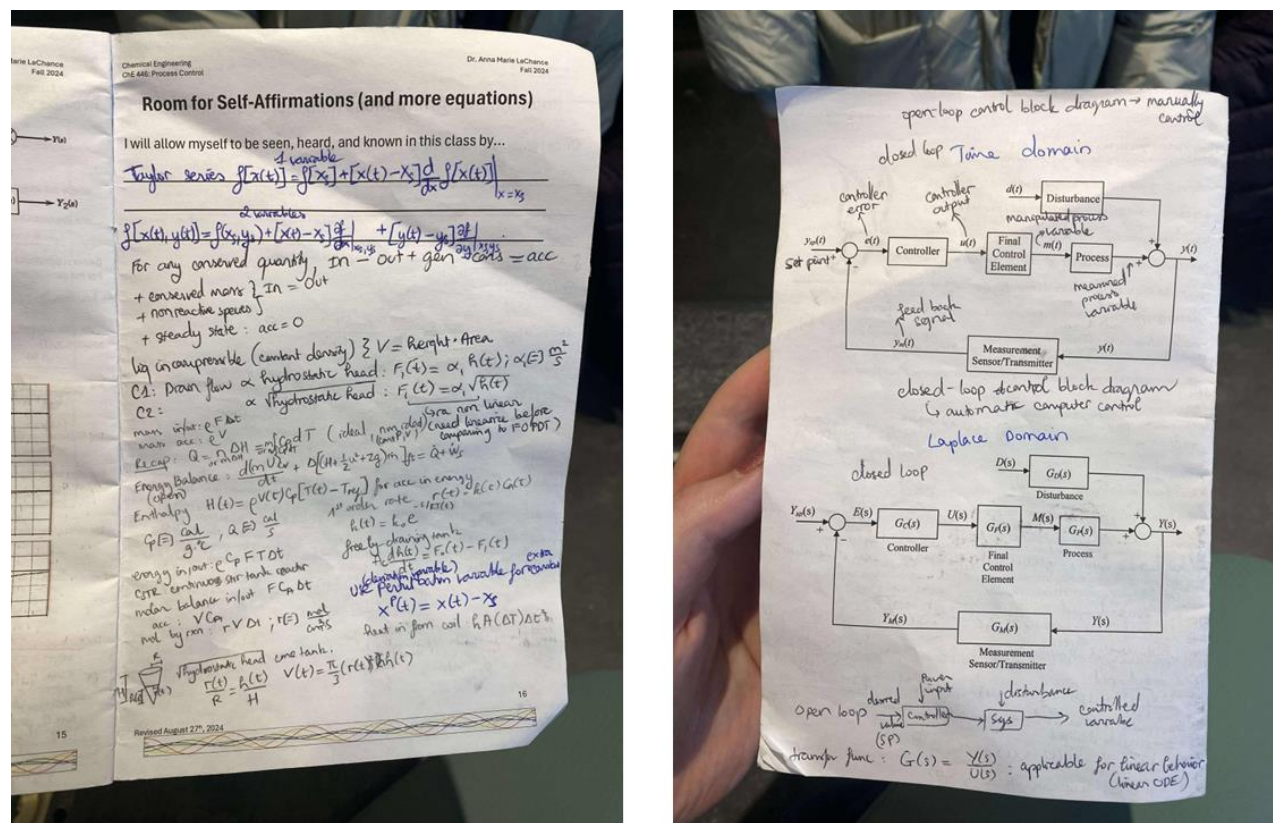


Figure 5. Example of a student who drew even more equations in their syllabus.

6. Summary, Lessons Learned, & Future Work

This paper is a message to instructors that we should be open to inspiration from queer, feminist, and punk forms of publishing and knowledge production. With alternative forms of syllabi, instructors can create inclusive, engaging documents that signal a supportive learning environment from the very first day of a course. More importantly, they can create engaging documents that result in more students accessing critical course resources. After all, the main directive of inclusive, student-centered pedagogy is to consider what students need to succeed in your course and simply give it to them.

Some challenges for instructors to look out for include both practical and epistemological issues. For instance, it is challenging to fit all the “important information” that one “needs” to include on a syllabus while also making it visually pleasing and engaging. Many instructors already bemoan the fact that syllabi have gotten “too bloated” with mandatory statements and other demands from both students and administrators; we should consider ways to remove unnecessary information or move some of the syllabus content to elsewhere on the LMS. Alternatively, we can simply go all-in and hand students a 40+-page packet on the first day of class. We could also explore the possibility of two separate documents: a syllabus with all the required statements and a zine “field guide” that contains the other student-centered content (e.g. tips on how to succeed in the course). Either way, this work should be done hand-in-hand with students to co-create a document that has everything future students might need, while also being adaptable to mid-semester changes in course content.

The pilot study presented here is by no means complete and future work will need to investigate the zine format further. First and foremost, more data needs to be collected on how the zine format (and the implementation of zines as the quiz equation sheet) benefits students with diverse learning styles. This study showed that students across the board are more likely to access course resources, policies, and learning goals when given them in a physical medium, but more needs to be done to demonstrate a clear link with student success (by assessing how well students who use the zine regularly meet course learning outcomes). One could also directly measure how students with marginalized or activist backgrounds engage with (or could have a hand in improving) the zine; anecdotally, students who were familiar with zine culture—which is to say, many of the queer students and students of color—were especially appreciative of the syllabus format and claimed to have taken advantage of its resources, though this should be assessed more thoroughly. Finally, one could compare more than two syllabus formats; in particular, “liquid syllabi” and other options exist that may have a wider appeal to the more “online” generations, even as more students move away from online life and physical media makes a cultural comeback.

On a deeper level, we must ask questions about what it means for a neoliberal institution (such as a state university) to co-opt radical, queer, & Black feminist aesthetics for the purpose of a college class, especially as higher education becomes prohibitively expensive to those groups. As instructors, we must not merely *take from* zine culture, but *contribute to* zine culture, considering ways to make our zines—and all our educational materials—even more accessible to the masses. For example, we can work directly with our local zine-makers and seek out their contributions.

This study presents an instructor-made zine, but future studies should investigate how student-created zines may have additional benefits, as in the works of Landherr [16] and Pascal [17].

As zines themselves enter a new digital era and interweave with Internet culture, we are starting to see artists play with the medium's materiality. In "CTRRRL-ZINE"—a copy of which I found anonymously left in the basket of my office door, since I now have a reputation as a zine-lover—readers are encouraged to visit a website where they can modify the zine by playing with JavaScript code, and then print out a copy to distribute to even more people so that even more code-curious learners can partake in its underground, material virality. [18] In what ways could syllabi, as well as other instructional materials such as homework assignments, partake in this DIY culture that's becoming increasingly relevant to so many students?

There is much more experimentation to be done in this space. If our goal is to improve interactivity and student inclusion, what if the syllabus was designed for students to fill in parts of their zine as they went through the class, like an activity booklet? What if the syllabus had hidden puzzle elements that rewarded students with extra credit when solved? What if students collaboratively produced next year's syllabus as a final assignment for the class, over and over again, adding new pieces every year and making the syllabus into a truly living organism-document that replicates itself like CTRRRL-ZINE? How can we evaluate the relationship between student engagement with the zine and overall course performance? On a pedagogical research level, more needs to be done to explore how this previously mundane and static document can be transformed for maximum impact.

References

- [1] Saville, B. K., Zinn, T. E., Brown, A. R., & Marchuk, K. A. (2010). Syllabus Detail and Students' Perceptions of Teacher Effectiveness. *Teaching of Psychology*, 37(3), 186–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986283.2010.488523>
- [2] Bernardi, F., Brown, C., Davis, L. et al. (2024). Cultivating inclusivity in introductory undergraduate STEM course syllabi. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 11, 784. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03276-y>
- [3] Sulik, G., & Keys, J. (2014). “Many Students Really Do Not Yet Know How to Behave!”: The Syllabus as a Tool for Socialization. *Teaching Sociology*, 42(2), 151-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X13513243>
- [4] Savaria M, Monteiro K (2017). A critical discourse analysis of engineering course syllabi and recommendations for increasing engagement among women in STEM. *J. STEM Educ.* 18(1):92–97. <https://www.jstem.org/jstem/index.php/JSTEM/article/download/2217/1840>
- [5] Prescod-Weinstein, C (2020). Making black women scientists under white empiricism: the racialization of epistemology in physics. *Signs*, 45(2): 421-447. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704991>
- [6] Eberly, M. B., Newton, S. E., & Wiggins, R. A. (2001). THE SYLLABUS AS A TOOL FOR STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING. *The Journal of General Education*, 50(1), 56–74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27797862>
- [7] Richmond, A. S., Morgan, R. K., Slattery, J. M., Mitchell, N. G., & Cooper, A. G. (2019). Project Syllabus: An Exploratory Study of Learner-Centered Syllabi. *Teaching of Psychology*, 46(1), 6-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628318816129>
- [8] Biktimirov, E. N., & Nilson, L. B. (2003). Mapping Your Course: Designing a Graphic Syllabus for Introductory Finance. *Journal of Education for Business*, 78(6), 308–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832320309598618>
- [9] Mikhailova, E.A. (2018), Enhancing Soil Science Education with a Graphic Syllabus. *Natural Sciences Education*, 47: 1-6 170025. <https://doi.org/10.4195/nse2017.12.0025>
- [10] Yarosh, J. H. (2021). The Syllabus Reconstructed: An Analysis of Traditional and Visual Syllabi for Information Retention and Inclusiveness. *Teaching Sociology*, 49(2), 173-183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X21996784>
- [11] Seth, S. (2009). Putting knowledge in its place: science, colonialism, and the postcolonial. *Postcolonial Studies*, 12(4), 373–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790903350633>
- [12] Nijsten, Nina. (2020). Scissors & Chainsaws No. 2 : Diary Comic Zine Made in July 2020 During International Zine Month. Gent, Belgium: Nina Nijsten, 2020. <https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/15003527>

[13] Piepmeier, A. (2008). Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community. *American Periodicals*, 18(2), 213–238. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41219799>

[14] Strong, LaToya & Gilbert, Aderinsola. (2021). "Abolitionist Teaching & The Black Feminist Imagination," *Abolition Science Podcast*, March 9th, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.abolitionscience.org/home/abolitionistteachingblack-feminist-imagination>

[15] Kynard, Carmen. (2022). *"Word is BOND": An Introduction to Black rhetoric and Language for Undergraduate Students*, Texas Christian University. Accessed at: <https://www.funkdafied.org/black-rhetoric-and-language-syllabus-2022.html>

[16] Landherr, L. (2023), *Teaching Fugacity through Comics and Assessing the Impact on Student Confidence and Understanding* Paper presented at 2023 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition, Baltimore , Maryland. 10.18260/1-2-44418. <https://peer.asee.org/44418>

[17] Pascal, J., & Pascal, T. L. (2017), *Using Student Developed Comics to Promote Learning of Transport Phenomena Concepts* Paper presented at 2017 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition, Columbus, Ohio. 10.18260/1-2-29088. <https://peer.asee.org/29088>

[18] carol dinh, *CTRRRL-ZINE: A punk guide to creative coding*. Accessed at: <https://urlocalcyborg.itch.io/ctrrrl-zine>

Survey Items [variable name]

In general, how often do you consult syllabi in your courses? [baseline]

- Never (1)
- Once or twice total per semester (2)
- About once a month (3)
- About once a week (4)
- Several times per week (5)
- Daily or almost daily (6)

In this course, how often did you use the zine (physical) syllabus for any reason? [zfreq_general]

- Never (1)
- Once or twice total this semester (2)
- About once a month (3)
- About once a week (4)
- Several times per week (5)
- Daily or almost daily (6)

How often did you reference the following resources of the zine (physical) syllabus this semester? (*Scale: Never - Daily or Almost Daily, same as zfreq_general*)

- Course Description & Learning Goals [zfreq_descLG]
- Course Policies (e.g., Grading, Extension Policy) [zfreq_policy]
- Course Schedule (Deadlines, Lecture Schedule) [zfreq_schedule]
- Submission Requirements for Assignments (Homework, Project) [zfreq_submit]
- Statements on Academic Integrity, GenAI, Accessibility, Title XI, etc. [zfreq_statement]
- Mental Health & Support Resources [zfreq_health]
- Equation Sheet [zfreq_eqn]

How often did you use the online syllabus for any reason? [ofreq_general]

- Never (1)
- Once or twice total this semester (2)
- About once a month (3)
- About once a week (4)
- Several times per week (5)
- Daily or almost daily (6)

How often did you reference the following resources of the online syllabus this semester? (*Scale: Never - Daily or Almost Daily, same as ofreq_general*)

- Course Description & Learning Goals [ofreq_descLG]
- Course Policies (e.g., Grading, Extension Policy) [ofreq_policy]
- Course Schedule (Deadlines, Lecture Schedule) [ofreq_schedule]
- Submission Requirements for Assignments (Homework, Project) [ofreq_submit]
- Statements on Academic Integrity, GenAI, Accessibility, Title XI, etc. [ofreq_statement]
- Mental Health & Support Resources [ofreq_health]
- Equation Sheet [ofreq_eqn]

Rank how much you agree with the following statements. (Scale: Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly agree (5), N/A (0))

Items Related to Student Behavior:

- I wrote notes or annotated the zine (quiz formulas, reminders, highlights). [bhvr_annotate]
- I completed interactive activities in the zine (e.g., scanning QR codes, making a mental health plan). [bhvr_interact]
- While on campus, I kept the zine on my person most of the time. [bhvr_onperson]
- The zine encouraged me to look up course information more often than I would for an online-only syllabus. [bhvr_lookup]
- Having the equation sheet in the same document made me reference the rest of the syllabus more often. [bhvr_eqn_incentive]

Items Related to Student Preferences:

- The zine made it easier to find the information I needed. [pref_find]
- I found the zine visually appealing. [pref_beauty]
- When I lost my zine, it was difficult to get a new one from the instructor. [pref_lost_neg]
- If given a physical copy of a course syllabus in future courses, I would prefer the smaller zine format to a standard-size (8.5"x11"). [pref_format]

Items Related to the Equation Sheet:

- I used the free space to write my own equations to help me on the quizzes. [eqn_self]
- The equation sheet had most of the tools I needed for my assignments. [eqn_useful]
- The zine did not include enough space for my own equations. [eqn_space_neg]
- Having access to the rest of the syllabus content during quizzes was distracting. [eqn_distraction_neg]

Do you have any other comments about using the syllabus in zine form? What features could be changed to make it more useful? (short text) [open]