



*Reframing Syllabi as Aesthetic Encounters:  
Audio Script*

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## Audio Script<sup>1</sup>

Michael Lockett

**H**ello, my name is Michael Lockett. On behalf of my colleague, Gabe Wong, I'd like to welcome you to the [transcription of the] audio accompaniment of our *Reframing Syllabi* project. Gabe will join us shortly; in the meantime, I'll proceed with some introductory comments.

The appearance and use of syllabi in post-secondary classrooms can sometimes be limited, at least in terms of direct address, to an initial classroom session. Thereafter they might only be used to clarify curricular details.

In such cases syllabi tend to be framed with the kind of significance one might apply to instruction manuals: something reductive and denotative and something we should consult before asking for clarity, be it from a call-centre helpdesk or a busy teacher.

But syllabi needn't be positioned that way. Many teachers create syllabi that transgress institutional templates or use their syllabi for pedagogical purposes beyond introductory frames. Such syllabi may include epigraphs, images or other media forms, fill-in-the-blank reading lists, supplementary resources, negotiable assessment tasks, and so on. These are only a few of the non-standardized ways by which professors play with the genre.

Gabe and I thought those exceptions significant, in part because they reimagine the aesthetic and educative possibilities of a primary curricular text. And so, as our longer conversations about aesthetic experience in relation to curricular structures unfolded, we started talking about syllabi in aesthetic terms, all the while cataloguing some genre signatures and extra-genre possibilities.

We recognized the importance of syllabi as critical and prominently positioned curricular texts and started wondering what else they might achieve if they're genre conventions expanded. We wondered what this would mean for an intended readership, those enrolled in the course at hand, and an unintended readership, those considering the course or those approaching similar courses from pedagogical perspectives.

Eventually we decided to collaborate on a kind of applied art slash curricular project — namely a syllabus that might press some of the genre boundaries we identified. This was also a way of prompting our largely theoretical and abstract discourse towards something concrete.

The syllabus we designed is displayed in entirety (including a handful of typographical errors we missed in our final proof reading). To be clear this text did not replace the course description template mandated by the institution but rather functioned as an adjunct.

That said, it includes plenty of conventional aspects necessary to explain the course of study, in addition to less conventional aspects. I'll return later to address the latter, focusing on the ways in which those pieces appeared in or mediated classroom experience. And now I'll turn the discussion over to Gabe; he'll share some details on our design process and the aesthetic theories informing his art and teaching practices. Gabe?

## Gabe Wong

Thank you, Michael.

At first glance, you will notice that the syllabus takes the form of a small book. This form was chosen carefully to evoke a certain tone, feeling and message.

Michael and I began the design process very broadly, brainstorming concepts like, maybe, a large poster, or taking a cue from albums and making a small booklet in the same vein. Most of our ideas centered around an object of graphic design, most likely to be printed, rather than something, say, video or audio. As we discussed, it became apparent that we were both drawn to creating a book of some sort.

From here, Michael showed me books he came to admire through his own scholarship, namely books of poetry published by Gaspereau Press in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. He told me he was drawn to that book design, in part, because it combines classic, minimally adorned styles with spectacular contemporary free verse.

The books Michael admired were very similar to the books that I admired. Books coming out of small presses, such as Éditions B42 based in Paris. These presses draw from the formal art of bookmaking, where the book as an object is as important as the content it contains.

However, both presses also publish books relating to contemporary culture, a space that allows for experimentation and critical thought yet also grounded in formality. The look and tone of their books and the inspiration for our own syllabus was to create something poetic, implying critical experimentation, formality and creative thought.

That balance between the formalized and experimental was a very interesting to me from an aesthetic standpoint. We often associate ideas of aesthetics to art and creativity, both of which are experimental and boundless, but as a designer, aesthetics are actually quite formalized and the space for experimentation must be carefully carved out. This also relates to the higher education classroom; formal spaces of learning but also a space to explore new ideas.

That counterbalance between the classical or formal with the experimental is something that Michael wanted to replicate within the course itself. He wanted to, within each classroom session, to create some curricular spaces that were highly formalized and rigid and others that were experimental and fluid, in the sense that prompts were still provided but learning could, hopefully, emerge in less anticipated ways.

I think we both found commonality in books where the aesthetic was not simply decorative but something that implied a deep connection to writing, authorship, the history of books, to the craft and materials of bookbinding. All of the samples we collected were design objects, beautifully considered and a pleasure to hold and own. They not only engaged us visually, with exceptional visual design, but also engaged us haptically and even audibly, through the touch and sound of the papers, from the course texture of the cover paper, to the soft yet slightly rough laid paper of the inside pages.

Again, the design of these books are superficially quite formal yet the details contain novel ways of playing with type and image. From covers with large type filling the page, to images reaching the edges of the paper juxtaposed with a small image surrounded by whitespace. The design of the books that inspired us, would often jump between formal and informal ways of presenting content (something I will discuss later). The tone that is produced is something poetic, thoughtful yet critical or rebellious.

Because we were very much in agreement in our idea for the final design, having spent the time to understand each other and to be “on the same page”, the design process from there went quite smoothly. Michael produced content and provided to me the overall structure, which matched what we had discussed and I put it together accordingly, to match our vision.

I was very conscious about the pacing of the book, creating little surprises by breaking the written content with pages of imagery so I may have adjusted the piece slightly from Michael's original plan. He had also provided me with some of his own photography to use inside the syllabus, which I looked through them and selected from, choosing ones that I believed worked best for the syllabus, in terms of themes and tone.

Speaking of imagery, I am conscious that the images seem somewhat unrelated to the subject matter. This technique is actually quite common in artist books. The intention of these images was to allow for reflection and inquiry; “What does this image mean? How does it relate?” As Scott McCloud of *Understanding Comics* says, we always find meaning or resonance regardless of how jarring the contrast. Finding meaning encourages critical thought which is why they are so important to understanding, even if they are not a literal representation of the context.

I found an underlying theme of geology, landscape and perspective within the images Michael shared with me from his photographic portfolio. The book is sandwiched by images of landscape from near, texture of cracked earth, zooming out into a cliffside and finishing with a wide landscape. I wanted to suggest learning from different perspectives. The imagery on the spread of page 10, provides a break from the written content, reiterates the poetic tone, and allows for reflection. They fit into the previous images of cliffs but instead are manmade, pigeon's natural habitats being mountainsides and the inevitable crumbling of manmade landscapes such as the ones seen in the image of a parking lot.

Also, I believe that teaching revolves around creating relationships with the students, and it is helpful to offer something autobiographical to create a connection with the students. I think the fact that these images were shot by Michael, that creates a connection to the students and gives a sense of empathy for the instructor, reflecting qualities of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2010), where one finds aesthetic value in creating, reflecting, or discovering relationships between people (humans) and their social contexts.

Finally, some technical notes, I put together the design through a mix of Adobe products, InDesign for layout and Photoshop for textures and effects, which went through a few simple

revisions. It mostly stayed the same from the original plan though we moved pages and pictures around to get the pacing right, which for me was based on feel.

Due to budget constraints, we did not provide a printed piece, but rather a high quality digital version, a pdf file, which visually depicted the tactile qualities of the paper. In retrospect, I think this was a good decision as it was an experiment, and environmental considerations such as creating disposable objects and waste, could create moral judgements that would affect the aesthetic engagement the user would have to the design piece and therefore the instructor and the class.

Reflecting on my process with Michael to develop this syllabus, I remember when I first discussed this project I had never really considered the syllabus too much other than it being a preliminary and mandatory document to give to the class. Though, I did probably give it more thought in comparison to other fields as an instructor in graphic design and visual communication.

As an instructor in graphic design, the syllabus has always been something that established the instructor's credibility to the class. After all, if it is design class, everything that is produced must also reflect the principles and the tone of the course and instructor.

I remember as a student being excited to see the syllabus as an examples of the instructor's work, as often we never had the chance to see their design work. I also remember as an instructor taking very seriously, the visual design, the layout and all aesthetic choices of the syllabus/course outline, knowing that it would be judged as a symbol of me as the instructor and my credibility. In that respect, it might be quite different in other fields.

However, with the adoption of standardized course syllabi, which has even affected design schools, that autonomy seems to be lost, to inform the class not just of your own credibility but the tone of the course.

Thinking about how the syllabus could affect the entire tone of the course. I reflected upon Yuriko Saito's ideas from *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007), drawing on aesthetic experiences in our everyday rather than those situated in the art-world. Which is really the domain of the designer, though our skills are more often than not to promote commercial driven purposes rather than social ones.

As the syllabus is one the first thing the student encounters in the course, and also a symbol or distillation of the entire course, I expect that it sets the tone for the rest of the course. This curriculum is somewhat disruptive and to be introduced at the beginning of the course probably comes as a surprise to many students who are expecting an introduction document or user manual to the course, as Michael said in the introduction. This syllabus sets the tone of the course to say that it, like the syllabus, is critical, somewhat formal, but also experimental and poetic. I am glad that Michael created this tone throughout the class, through formal and informal teaching methods.

Also, focusing on creating something with aesthetic value may give students a feeling of respect and value to the class. As Saito (2007) notes, beautiful things are often attributed more value (which can be used for good and bad). Aesthetics can also convey a sense of respect to the user. I wonder if the student feels that they are more respected or finds more value in the class? Does it

encourage the students to be more thoughtful as the course outline draws from the visual language of poetry books?

What I also reflect on is the idea of aesthetic teaching and this syllabus as a catalyst for it. How can we draw from the aesthetic of the syllabus and aesthetic teaching throughout the whole course? Can we further the idea of aesthetic teaching, creating a multi-faceted sensory experience, where the syllabus plays a role in creating a unified aesthetic teaching experience? How can we work with the class as a whole to create connections beyond the classroom? Where the seasons, location – it's views and histories, are all taken into account – Similar to what Saito (2007) notes with the example of the Japanese tea ceremony.

An awareness to the potential of creating a unified multisensory teaching experience through aesthetic engagement can be an effective approach for increased engagement where the syllabus, as a tool and symbol of the course, plays a pivotal role. As instructors, we are constantly in the role of creating relationships and contexts for students and are in a very privileged position to give them a unified "experience" hopefully through a considered multifaceted aesthetic approach.

I'll turn the discussion back to Michael for some additional comments on how the ideas we embedded in the syllabus were applied to the classroom. Michael?

**Michael Lockett**

Thank you, Gabe.

I want to return for a moment to that counterbalance between the formal and informal.

To illustrate this notion in practical terms for the students, Gabe and I developed the schematic on page 7. As the text suggests, we spent the first hour of most classes engaged in panel presentation and discussion; these sessions replicated, as closely as possible, the kind of formal presentation scenarios students might encounter in graduate studies or elsewhere in their professional lives.

We used this heightened discursive space to practice rehearsed and extemporaneous public address in a way that added some but hopefully not too much pressure. It also established a pattern for our proceedings and one that facilitated a transition to the semi-formal (often semi-structured large or small group discussions).

Following the break, we would return to semi-structured group activities dedicated to that week's theme. And then for the final hour or half-hour we'd moved to a completely unstructured configuration in which students could continue the week's activity or collaborate on upcoming assignments.

I also want to briefly mention the epigraphs that precede the text, since they are another device we borrowed from Gaspereau texts, in this case stylistically and literally, since they both appear in a Gaspereau publication, namely Jan Zwicky's *Wisdom and Metaphor* (2008).

Both epigraphs resonated with classroom sessions in myriad ways. One of the general aims of the course was to illustrate the complex and polyphonous nature of curricular studies. As a pair of juxtaposed quotations, they provided a frame for our discussions of perspective and voice. They pointed to the omnipresent pedagogical challenge of seeing terrain and experience beyond one's perspective. And they also prefaced our political discussions, serving as a kind of entry point for explorations of the ways in which curricula can marginalize, subjugate, and oppress people, in addition to more practice-based discussions about pedagogies that can root or uproot perspectives.

Gabe and I also hoped the ideas of patterns and perspectives would resonate through the syllabus's photography, though I'm not sure if we were successful on that front. As Gabe mentioned we selected images with a kind of geological motif. From my perspective, that motif seemed to resonate with tensions between intentional and emergent structures. For instance, in class we often discussed what might be termed inorganic and organic forms of curricular thought. The former we framed as an abstract mode and one wherein we might devise intentional shapes and patterns. For example, we looked at the way certain curricular documents define objectives and approaches with specific rhetorical forms and conventions. And then we looked at the ways in which these idealized forms morph, or crumble, or collapse when they reach the corporeal realm of classroom experience.

In turn, we talked about organic curricular thought... about the importance of counterbalancing abstract design work with imagination and concrete experience as a means of acknowledging the specificity of localized curricular contexts. I think this tension is perhaps best illustrated by the images juxtaposed on page ten of the pdf.

Although I'm personally fond of the images, I'm not sure I was able to articulate their curricular resonance to my students in a meaningful way. Some students remarked that they found the photographs attractive, in the sense that they appreciated the care and attention Gabe and I applied to the text, and that they enjoyed reading syllabus. Similarly, a few students wanted to know where they were shot and if I took them. So, through those conversations I was able to share some aspects of my personal life (and perhaps alter my pedagogical identity accordingly). But aside from those anecdotes, I can't really speak to the image's educative value. I think this particular syllabus would be less without them but I'm not sure why exactly — part of me wants them to be something more than pretty pictures and another part of me wonders why I want that.

As an aside, here's a list of the geographies represented. The images on page 3, 14, and 15 were shot in the Albertan Badlands, near Drumheller. Page 4 is from the Chalaad Glacier, just south of the border between Russia and the Republic of Georgia. The image on the left side of page 10 is a Stupa in Sri Lanka's Southern Province while the right side is a parking garage near Bloor Street in downtown Toronto.

Moving on to the trio of concluding text passages in the syllabus, the theory vs. practice section on page 11 had mostly pragmatic motivations. In my experience teacher candidates are often hungry for practical lessons. Less so for theoretical discourses. And that makes sense. Students are anticipating and might be anxious about their first teaching assignments, so practical considerations carry an obvious utility.

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That said, I used this passage, and returned to it occasionally, to prompt discussions about what theory is and why it is a critical component of professional practice. I also tried to use formative assessment opportunities, in class discourse or written feedback, to recognize and applaud moments when students connected theory to practice and vice-versa. I can't claim that this cohort of students valued theory more than previous cohorts. But acknowledging the tension in the syllabus and addressing it in class, did make me more mindful of past lapses, of teaching opportunities where I likely failed to make such connections explicit.

One activity that did help direct the students' analogical attention was the thought experiment on page 12. It's something we addressed in the second class through an exercise where students identified and then explicated a specific metaphor they had experienced as a student. They could choose a metaphor from the list or create their own.

We returned to the activity at the end of the semester, I believe in the second to last class, but this time we emphasized aspirational metaphors... in other words, metaphors for curriculum students were hoping to foster for their future students.

We also explicated the catalogue on page 12 graphically by charting some select metaphors along two axes. The horizontal axis represented order or lack thereof, while the vertical axis represented positivity or negativity. So, for example, students agreed that "curriculum as colonial instrument" was intensely negative and suggested a significant degree of order, so it fell to the lower right quadrant. Meanwhile "symphony" was placed in the upper right as a metaphor that was positive and highly structured, whereas ecology generated a range of placements on both the order and positivity spectrums.

The aim, of course, was not to determine a "correct" placement but rather to use the act of placing as a prompt for explicating the metaphors in terms of curricular experience and possibilities.

Similarly, the final passage, "How to Play," was one we explored at both the beginning and end of the semester, in addition to a midterm reflection. It's also a segment I struggled with initially. I was wary of framing our curriculum as a game, fearing that the metaphor would hypostatize or mislead, hence the perhaps awkward caveats that open the passage. Ultimately, I decided to include the passage because it seemed a useful way of prompting practical discussions for the course itself.

More specifically, in our second class we discussed specific strategies for succeeding in this course at both the scholastic (study habits and practices) and biological levels (the importance of sleep hygiene and nutritional strategies for coping with a four-hour block scheduled from 5:00 to 9:00 pm). But we also spoke of motivations for our play and ethical responsibilities. Given the public context of the institution and that many students aspired to careers in public educational contexts, we talked about our responsibilities in both present and future terms. When we returned to the text at the midterm and end of class, we reflected on the efficacy of our strategies and the ways in which our sense of pedagogical ethics might have shifted. It also carried some practical benefits for me — it helped me get a sense of the workloads students experienced in relation to the respective assignments. In some cases my estimates were reasonable; in others, less so.

I hope some of those explanations and discussions were useful. Again, the aim of this publication is not to position this syllabus as exemplary but rather to use it as a prompt for larger questions of aesthetics in relation to curricular experience. Given their unfortunate relegation to templated or standardized forms, that textual space deserves additional attention, consideration, and renovation. And given the ubiquity of syllabi in post-secondary contexts, it's important to fully consider their possibilities as a curricular genre.<sup>2</sup>

## References

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This document offers an unedited transcription, provided by the authors, of the audio file that accompanies their syllabus artefact. The syllabus may also be located at [http://buapps.ubishops.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Reframing-Syllabi-as-Aesthetic-Encounters\\_Syllabus.pdf](http://buapps.ubishops.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Reframing-Syllabi-as-Aesthetic-Encounters_Syllabus.pdf) and the audio file may also be located at [http://buapps.ubishops.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ReframingSyllabi\\_FinalAudio.mp3](http://buapps.ubishops.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ReframingSyllabi_FinalAudio.mp3)

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