

Teaching Excellence at Yale

Clearly organized courses promote learning through engagement and reflection.

Jami Carlacio, Lecturer in English (pictured right), encourages student learning by providing clear course structure for *English 114: Democracy and the Media in the Digital Age*. “Students don’t necessarily have a sense for how concepts, readings, and assignments all work together,” Carlacio said, “so the course is designed to make those relationships clear.” By showing how things like classroom activities support learning goals, Carlacio helps her students engage confidently with course content while reflecting on their growth over time.

Carlacio approaches class design by “thinking how students think,” looking for places to clarify connections among concepts, readings, and assignments. She accomplishes this by organizing her course into units that align specific learning goals with content, signaling to students how the links among ideas and tasks can promote new skills. In her first unit, *Is Objective Journalism Dead?*, students learn to analyze arguments and write clearly while reading essays about the methods and goals of journalism. As Carlacio said, the unit design shows students how “analyzing the landscape of modern journalism can



help them mature their own writing.”

By understanding the purpose of course content, Carlacio’s students are also better positioned to assess their own learning. In cover letter assignments explaining revisions to their research papers, students reflect on how various course readings and interactions have helped to grow their writing abilities. Students are encouraged by Carlacio’s careful efforts to develop their skills and self-awareness, writing in evaluations that “the content and structure of the course was very well laid out . . . each paper seemed to build upon the skills gained from the previous assignment.”

For faculty looking to clarify their course design for students, Carlacio suggests starting with the syllabus, which can “tell students



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about the course, give them frameworks for thinking about big course questions, and lay out expectations for learning.” Carlacio’s results are impressive: as another student wrote, “the biggest improvement to my writing would definitely be using the active voice to powerfully and concisely deliver my argument.” Carlacio’s design thus enables her students to understand how embracing course learning goals helps them to grow.

Research and resources exploring the impact of organized course structure on student learning:

Josipa Roksa, Professor, Department of Sociology and Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, et al, explore in their research study how organized instruction cultivates student learning by modeling faculty interest in student learning, inviting more student engagement, and increasing student motivation. [Read “Facilitating Academic Performance in College: Understanding the Role of Clear and Organized Instruction,” in *Higher Education*.](#)

Yale’s Center for Teaching and Learning offers [a resource webpage featuring examples, recommendations, and resources for organizing your course to facilitate student learning.](#)

Yale’s Center for Teaching and Learning also offers a three-day intensive summer workshop where instructors can design or redesign a course. [Registration for May 2019 Course \(Re\)Design will open in March 2019.](#)

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