

LEARNING FROM #SYLLABUS

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The syllabus is the manifesto of the 21st century.
— Sean Dockray and Benjamin Forster¹

#Syllabus Struggles

In August 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old boy living in Ferguson, Missouri, was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson. Soon after, as the civil protests denouncing police brutality and institutional racism began to mount across the United States, Dr. Marcia Chatelain, Associate Professor of History and African American Studies at Georgetown University, launched an online call urging other academics and teachers ‘to devote the first day of classes to a conversation about Ferguson’ and ‘to recommend texts, collaborate on conversation starters, and inspire dialogue about some aspect of the Ferguson crisis.’² Chatelain did so using the hashtag #FergusonSyllabus.

Also in August 2014, using the hashtag #gamergate, groups of users on 4Chan, 8Chan, Twitter, and Reddit instigated a misogynistic harassment campaign against game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu, media critic Anita Sarkeesian, as well as a number of other female and feminist game producers, journalists, and critics. In the following weeks, *The New Inquiry* editors and contributors compiled a reading list and issued a call for suggestions for their ‘TNI Syllabus: Gaming and Feminism’.³

In June 2015, Donald Trump announced his candidacy for President of the United States. In the weeks that followed, he became the presumptive Republican nominee, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* introduced the syllabus ‘Trump 101’.⁴ Historians N.D.B. Connolly and Keisha N. Blain found ‘Trump 101’ inadequate, ‘a mock college syllabus [...] suffer[ing] from a number of egregious omissions and inaccuracies’, failing to include ‘contributions of scholars of color and address the critical subjects of Trump’s racism, sexism, and xenophobia’. They assembled ‘Trump Syllabus 2.0’.⁵ Soon after, in response to a video in which Trump engaged in ‘an extremely lewd conversation about women’ with TV host Billy Bush, Laura Ciolkowski put together a ‘Rape Culture Syllabus’.⁶

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- 1 Sean Dockray, Benjamin Forster, and Public Office, ‘README.md’, *Hyperreadings*, 15 February 2018, <https://samiz-dat.github.io/hyperreadings/>.
 - 2 Marcia Chatelain, ‘Teaching the #FergusonSyllabus’, *Dissent Magazine*, 28 November 2014, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/teaching-ferguson-syllabus/>.
 - 3 ‘TNI Syllabus: Gaming and Feminism’, *The New Inquiry*, 2 September 2014, <https://thenewinquiry.com/tni-syllabus-gaming-and-feminism/>.
 - 4 ‘Trump 101’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 June 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Trump-Syllabus/236824/>.
 - 5 N.D.B. Connolly and Keisha N. Blain, ‘Trump Syllabus 2.0’, *Public Books*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/trump-syllabus-2-0/>.
 - 6 Laura Ciolkowski, ‘Rape Culture Syllabus’, *Public Books*, 15 October 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/rape-culture-syllabus/>.

In April 2016, members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe established the Sacred Stone Camp and started the protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline, the construction of which threatened the only water supply at the Standing Rock Reservation. The protest at the site of the pipeline became the largest gathering of native Americans in the last 100 years and they earned significant international support for their ReZpect Our Water campaign. As the struggle between protestors and the armed forces unfolded, a group of Indigenous scholars, activists, and supporters of the struggles of First Nations people and persons of color, gathered under the name the NYC Stands for Standing Rock Committee, put together #StandingRockSyllabus.⁷

The list of online syllabi created in response to political struggles has continued to grow, and at present includes many more examples:

All Monuments Must Fall Syllabus

#Blkwomensyllabus

#BLMSyllabus

#BlackIslamSyllabus

#CharlestonSyllabus

#ColinKaepernickSyllabus

#ImmigrationSyllabus

Puerto Rico Syllabus (#PRSyllabus)

#SayHerNameSyllabus

Syllabus for White People to Educate Themselves

Syllabus: Women and Gender Non-Conforming People Writing about Tech

#WakandaSyllabus

What To Do Instead of Calling the Police: A Guide, A Syllabus, A Conversation, A Process

#YourBaltimoreSyllabus

It would be hard to compile a comprehensive list of all the online syllabi that have been created by social justice movements in the last five years, especially, but not exclusively, those initiated in North America in the context of feminist and anti-racist activism. In what is now a widely spread phenomenon, these political struggles use social networks and resort to the hashtag template ‘#__Syllabus’ to issue calls for the bottom-up aggregation of resources necessary for political analysis and pedagogy centering on their concerns. For this reason, we’ll call this phenomenon ‘#Syllabus’.

During the same years that saw the spread of the #Syllabus phenomenon, university course syllabi have also been transitioning online, often in a top-down process initiated by academic institutions, which has seen the syllabus become a contested document in the midst of increasing casualization of teaching labor, expansion of copyright protections, and technology-driven marketization of education.

In what follows, we retrace the development of the online syllabus in both of these contexts, to investigate the politics enmeshed in this new media object. Our argument

7 ‘#StandingRockSyllabus’, *NYC Stands with Standing Rock*, 11 October 2016, <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>.

is that, on the one hand, #Syllabus names the problem of contemporary political culture as pedagogical in nature, while, on the other hand, it also exposes academicized critical pedagogy and intellectuality as insufficiently political in their relation to lived social reality. Situating our own stakes as both activists and academics in the present debate, we explore some ways in which the radical politics of #Syllabus could be supported to grow and develop as an articulation of solidarity between amateur librarians and radical educators.

#Syllabus in Historical Context: Social Movements and Self-Education

When Professor Chatelain launched her call for #FergusonSyllabus, she was mainly addressing a community of fellow educators:

I knew Ferguson would be a challenge for teachers: When schools opened across the country, how were they going to talk about what happened? My idea was simple, but has resonated across the country: Reach out to the educators who use Twitter. Ask them to commit to talking about Ferguson on the first day of classes. Suggest a book, an article, a film, a song, a piece of artwork, or an assignment that speaks to some aspect of Ferguson. Use the hashtag: #FergusonSyllabus.⁸

Her call had a much greater resonance than she had originally anticipated as it reached beyond the limits of the academic community. #FergusonSyllabus had both a significant impact in shaping the analysis and the response to the shooting of Michael Brown, and in inspiring the many other #Syllabus calls that soon followed.

The #Syllabus phenomenon comprises different approaches and modes of operating. In some cases, the material is clearly claimed as the creation of a single individual, as in the case of #BlackLivesMatterSyllabus, which is prefaced on the project's landing page by a warning to readers that 'material compiled in this syllabus should not be duplicated without proper citation and attribution.'⁹ A very different position on intellectual property has been embraced by other #Syllabus interventions that have chosen a more commoning stance. #StandingRockSyllabus, for instance, is introduced as a crowd-sourced process and as a useful 'tool to access research usually kept behind paywalls.'¹⁰

The different workflows, modes of engagements, and positioning in relation to intellectual property make #Syllabus readable as symptomatic of the multiplicity that composes social justice movements. There is something old school—quite literally—about the idea of calling a list of online resources a 'syllabus'; a certain quaintness, evoking thoughts of teachers and homework. This is worthy of investigation especially if contrasted with the attention dedicated to other online cultural phenomena such as memes or fake news. Could it be that the online syllabus offers

8 Marcia Chatelain, 'How to Teach Kids About What's Happening in Ferguson', *The Atlantic*, 25 August 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/how-to-teach-kids-about-whats-happening-in-ferguson/379049/>.

9 Frank Leon Roberts, 'Black Lives Matter: Race, Resistance, and Populist Protest', 2016, <http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com/fall2016/>.

10 '#StandingRockSyllabus', *NYC Stands with Standing Rock*, 11 October 2016, <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>.

a useful, fresh format precisely for the characteristics that foreground its connections to older pedagogical traditions and techniques, predating digital cultures?

#Syllabus can indeed be analyzed as falling within a long lineage of pedagogical tools created by social movements to support processes of political subjectivation and the building of collective consciousness. Activists and militant organizers have time and again created and used various textual media objects—such as handouts, pamphlets, cookbooks, readers, or manifestos—to facilitate a shared political analysis and foment mass political mobilization.

In the context of the US, anti-racist movements have historically placed great emphasis on critical pedagogy and self-education. In 1964, the Council of Federated Organizations (an alliance of civil rights initiatives) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), created a network of 41 temporary alternative schools in Mississippi. Recently, the Freedom Library Project, a campaign born out of #FergusonSyllabus to finance under-resourced pedagogical initiatives, openly referenced this as a source of inspiration. The Freedom Summer Project of 1964 brought hundreds of activists, students, and scholars (many of whom were white) from the north of the country to teach topics and issues that the discriminatory state schools would not offer to black students. In the words of an SNCC report, Freedom Schools were established following the belief that ‘education—facts to use and freedom to use them—is the basis of democracy’,¹¹ a conviction echoed by the ethos of contemporary #Syllabus initiatives.

Bob Moses, a civil rights movement leader who was the head of the literary skills initiative in Mississippi, recalls the movement’s interest, at the time, in teaching methods that used the very production of teaching materials as a pedagogical tool:

I had gotten hold of a text and was using it with some adults [...] and noticed that they couldn’t handle it because the pictures weren’t suited to what they knew [...] That got me into thinking about developing something closer to what people were doing. What I was interested in was the idea of training SNCC workers to develop material with the people we were working with.¹²

It is significant that for him the actual use of the materials the group created was much less important than the process of producing the teaching materials together. This focus on what could be named as a ‘pedagogy of teaching’, or perhaps more accurately ‘the pedagogy of preparing teaching materials’, is also a relevant mechanism at play in the current #Syllabus initiatives, as their crowdsourcing encourages different kinds of people to contribute what they feel might be relevant resources for the broader movement.

Alongside the crucial import of radical black organizing, another relevant genealogy in which to place #Syllabus would be the international feminist movement and, in particular, the strategies developed in the 70s campaign Wages for Housework, spearheaded

11 Daniel Perlstein, ‘Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools’, *History of Education Quarterly* 30.3 (Autumn 1990): 302.

12 Perlstein, ‘Teaching Freedom’: 306.

by Selma James and Silvia Federici. The Wages for Housework campaign drove home the point that unwaged reproductive labor provides a foundation for capitalist exploitation. They wanted to encourage women to denaturalize and question the accepted division of labor into remunerated work outside the house and labor of love within the confines of domesticity, discussing taboo topics such as ‘prostitution as socialized housework’ and ‘forced sterilization’ as issues impacting poor, often racialized, women. The organizing efforts of Wages for Housework held political pedagogy at their core. They understood that that pedagogy required:

having literature and other materials available to explain our goals, all written in a language that women can understand. We also need different types of documents, some more theoretical, others circulating information about struggles. It is important that we have documents for women who have never had any political experience. This is why our priority is to write a popular pamphlet that we can distribute massively and for free—because women have no money.¹³

The obstacles faced by the Wages for Housework campaign were many, beginning with the issue of how to reach a dispersed constituency of isolated housewives and how to keep the revolutionary message at the core of their claims accessible to different groups. In order to tackle these challenges, the organizers developed a number of innovative communication tactics and pedagogical tools, including strategies to gain mainstream media coverage, pamphlets and leaflets translated into different languages,¹⁴ a storefront shop in Brooklyn, and promotional tables at local events.

Freedom Schools and the Wages for Housework campaign are only two amongst the many examples of the critical pedagogies developed within social movements. The #Syllabus phenomenon clearly stands in the lineage of this history, yet we should also highlight its specificity in relation to the contemporary political context in which it emerged. The #Syllabus acknowledges that since the 70s—and also due to students’ participation in protests and their display of solidarity with other political movements—subjects such as Marxist critical theory, women studies, gender studies, and African American studies, together with some of the principles first developed in critical pedagogy, have become integrated into the educational system. The fact that many initiators of #Syllabus initiatives are women and Black academics speaks to this historical shift as an achievement of that period of struggles. However, the very necessity felt by these educators to kick-start their #Syllabus campaigns outside the confines of academia simultaneously reveals the difficulties they encounter within the current privatized and exclusionary educational complex.

13 Silvia Federici and Arlen Austin (eds) *The New York Wages for Housework Committee 1972-1977: History, Theory and Documents*. New York: Autonomedia, 2017: 37.

14 Some of the flyers and pamphlets were digitized by MayDay Rooms, ‘a safe haven for historical material linked to social movements, experimental culture and the radical expression of marginalised figures and groups’ in London, and can be found in their online archive: ‘Wages for Housework: Pamphlets – Flyers – Photographs’, *MayDay Rooms*, <http://maydayrooms.org/archives/wages-for-housework/wfhw-pamphlets-flyers-photographs/>.

#Syllabus as a Media Object

Besides its contextualization within the historical legacy of previous grassroots mobilizations, it is also necessary to discuss #Syllabus as a new media object in its own right, in order to fully grasp its relevance for the future politics of knowledge production and transmission.

If we were to describe this object, a #Syllabus would be an ordered list of links to scholarly texts, news reports, and audiovisual media, mostly aggregated through a participatory and iterative process, and created in response to political events indicative of larger conditions of structural oppression. Still, as we have seen, #Syllabus as a media object doesn't follow a strict format. It varies based on the initial vision of their initiators, political causes, and social composition of the relevant struggle. Nor does it follow the format of traditional academic syllabi. While a list of learning resources is at the heart of any syllabus, a boilerplate university syllabus typically also includes objectives, a timetable, attendance, coursework, examination, and an outline of the grading system used for the given course. Relieved of these institutional requirements, the #Syllabus typically includes only a reading list and a hashtag. The reading list provides resources for understanding what is relevant to the here and now, while the hashtag provides a way to disseminate across social networks the call to both collectively edit and teach what is relevant to the here and now. Both the *list* and the *hashtag* are specificities and formal features of the contemporary (internet) culture and therefore merit further exploration in relation to the social dynamics at play in #Syllabus initiatives.

The different phases of the internet's development approached the problem of the discoverability of relevant information in different ways. In the early days, the Gopher protocol organized information into a hierarchical file tree. With the rise of World Wide Web (WWW), Yahoo tried to employ experts to classify and catalog the internet into a directory of links. That seemed to be a successful approach for a while, but then Google (founded in 1998) came along and started to use a webgraph of links to rank the importance of web pages relative to a given search query.

In 2005, Clay Shirky wrote the essay 'Ontology is Overrated: Categories, Links and Tags',¹⁵ developed from his earlier talk 'Folksonomies and Tags: The Rise of User-Developed Classification'. Shirky used Yahoo's attempt to categorize the WWW to argue against *any* attempt to classify a vast heterogenous body of information into a single hierarchical categorical system. In his words: '[Yahoo] missed [...] that, if you've got enough links, you don't need the *hierarchy* anymore. There is no shelf. There is no file system. The links alone are enough.' Those words resonated with many. By following simple formatting rules, we, the internet users, whom *Time* magazine named Person of the Year in 2006, proved that it is possible to collectively write the largest encyclopedia ever. But, even beyond that, and as per Shirky's argument, if enough of us organized our own snippets of the vast body of the internet, we could replace old canons, hierarchies, and ontologies with folksonomies, social bookmarks, and (hash)tags.

15 Clay Shirky, 'Ontology Is Overrated: Categories, Links, and Tags', 2005, http://shirky.com/writings/hercomeseverybody/ontology_ouerrated.html.

Very few who lived through those times would have thought that only a few years later most user-driven services would be acquired by a small number of successful companies and then be shut down. Or, that Google would decide not to include the biggest hashtag-driven platform, Twitter, into its search index and that the search results on its first page would only come from a handful of usual suspects: media conglomerates, Wikipedia, Facebook, LinkedIn, Amazon, Reddit, Quora. Or, that Twitter would become the main channel for the racist, misogynist, fascist escapades of the President of United States.

This internet folk naivety—stoked by an equally enthusiastic, venture-capital-backed startup culture—was not just naivety. This was also a period of massive experimental use of these emerging platforms. Therefore, this history would merit to be properly revisited and researched. In this text, however, we can only hint to this history: to contextualize how the hashtag as a formalization initially emerged, and how with time the user-driven web lost some of its potential. Nonetheless, hashtags today still succeed in propagating political mobilizations in the network environment. Some will say that this propagation is nothing but a reflection of the internet as a propaganda machine, and there's no denying that hashtags do serve a propaganda function. However, it equally matters that hashtags retain the capacity to shape coordination and self-organization, and they are therefore a reflection of the internet as an organization machine.

As mentioned, #Syllabus as a media object is an ordered list of links to resources. In the long history of knowledge retrieval systems and attempts to help users find relevant information from big archives, the list on the internet continues in the tradition of the index card catalog in libraries, of charts in the music industry, or mixtapes and playlists in popular culture, helping people tell their stories of what is relevant and what isn't through an ordered sequence of items. The list (as a format) together with the hashtag find themselves in the list (pun intended) of the most iconic media objects of the internet. In the network media environment, being smart in creating new lists became the way to displace old lists of relevance, the way to dismantle canons, the way to unlearn. The way to become relevant.

The Academic Syllabus Migrates Online

#Syllabus interventions are a challenge issued by political struggles to educators as they expose a fundamental contradiction in the operations of academia. While critical pedagogies of yesteryear's social movements have become integrated into the education system, the radical lessons that these pedagogies teach students don't easily reconcile with their experience: professional practice courses, the rhetoric of employability and compulsory internships, where what they learn is merely instrumental, leaves them wondering how on earth they are to apply their Marxism or feminism to their everyday lives?

Cognitive dissonance is at the basis of degrees in the liberal arts. And to make things worse, the marketization of higher education, the growing fees and the privatization of research has placed universities in a position where they increasingly struggle to provide institutional space for critical interventions in social reality. As universities become more dependent on the 'customer satisfaction' of their students for survival, they steer away from heated political topics or from supporting faculty members who might decide to engage with them. Borrowing the words of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten,

'policy posits curriculum against study',¹⁶ creating the paradoxical situation wherein today's universities are places in which it is possible to do almost everything except study. What Harney and Moten propose instead is the re-appropriation of the diffuse capacity of knowledge generation that stems from the collective processes of self-organization and commoning. As Moten puts it: 'When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people.'¹⁷ And it is this practice of sharing a common repertoire—what Moten and Harney call 'rehearsal'¹⁸—that is crucially constitutive of a crowdsourced #Syllabus.

This contradiction and the tensions it brings to contemporary neoliberal academia can be symptomatically observed in the recent evolution of the traditional academic syllabus. As a double consequence of (some) critical pedagogies becoming incorporated into the teaching process and universities striving to reduce their liability risks, academic syllabi have become increasingly complex and extensive documents. They are now understood as both a 'social contract' between the teachers and their students, and 'terms of service'¹⁹ between the institution providing educational services and the students increasingly framed as sovereign consumers making choices in the market of educational services. The growing official import of the syllabus has had the effect that educators have started to reflect on how the syllabus translates the power dynamics into their classroom. For instance, the critical pedagogue Adam Heidebrink-Bruno has demanded that the syllabus be re-conceived as a manifesto²⁰—a document making these concerns explicit. And indeed, many academics have started to experiment with the form and purpose of the syllabus, opening it up to a process of co-conceptualization with their students, or proposing 'the other syllabus'²¹ to disrupt asymmetries.

At the same time, universities are unsurprisingly moving their syllabi online. A migration that can be read as indicative of three larger structural shifts in academia.

First, the push to make syllabi available online, initiated in the US, reinforces the differential effects of reputation economy. It is the Ivy League universities and their professorial star system that can harness the syllabus to advertise the originality of their scholarship, while the underfunded public universities and junior academics are burdened with teaching the required essentials. This practice is tied up with the replication in academia of the different valorization between what is considered to be the labor of production (research) and that of social reproduction (teaching). The low esteem (and corresponding lower rewards and remuneration) for the kinds of intellectual labors that can be considered labors of care—editing journals, reviewing papers or marking, for instance—fits perfectly well with the gendered legacies of the academic institution.

16 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, New York: Autonomedia, 2013, p. 81.

17 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, p. 110.

18 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, p. 110.

19 Angela Jenks, 'It's In The Syllabus', *Teaching Tools*, *Cultural Anthropology website*, 30 June 2016, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/910-it-s-in-the-syllabu/>.

20 Adam Heidebrink-Bruno, 'Syllabus as Manifesto: A Critical Approach to Classroom Culture', *Hybrid Pedagogy*, 28 August 2014, <http://hybridpedagogy.org/syllabus-manifesto-critical-approach-classroom-culture/>.

21 Lucy E. Bailey, 'The "Other" Syllabus: Rendering Teaching Politics Visible in the Graduate Pedagogy Seminar', *Feminist Teacher* 20.2 (2010): 139–56.

Second, with the withdrawal of resources to pay precarious and casualized academics during their ‘prep’ time (that is, the time in which they can develop new course material, including assembling new lists of references, updating their courses as well as the methodologies through which they might deliver these), syllabi now assume an ambivalent role between the tendencies for collectivization and individualization of insecurity. The reading lists contained in syllabi are not covered by copyrights; they are like playlists or recipes, which historically had the effect of encouraging educators to exchange lesson plans and make their course outlines freely available as a valuable knowledge common. Yet, in the current climate where universities compete against each other, the authorial function is being extended to these materials too. Recently, US universities have been leading a trend towards the interpretation of the syllabus as copyrightable material, an interpretation that opened up, as would be expected, a number of debates over who is a syllabus’ rightful owner, whether the academics themselves or their employers. If the latter interpretation were to prevail, this would enable universities to easily replace academics while retaining their contributions to the pedagogical offer. The fruits of a teacher’s labor could thus be turned into instruments of their own deskilling and casualization: why would universities pay someone to write a course when they can recycle someone else’s syllabus and get a PhD student or a precarious post doc to teach the same class at a fraction of the price?

This tendency to introduce a logic of property therefore spurs competitive individualism and erasure of contributions from others. Thus, crowdsourcing the syllabus in the context of growing precarization of labor risks remaining a partial process, as it might heighten the anxieties of those educators who do not enjoy the security of a stable job and who are therefore the most susceptible to the false promises of copyright enforcement and authorship understood as a competitive, small entrepreneurial activity. However, when inserted in the context of live, broader political struggles, the opening up of the syllabus could and should be an encouragement to go in the opposite direction, providing a ground to legitimize the collective nature of the educational process and to make all academic resources available without copyright restrictions, while devising ways to secure the proper attribution and the just remuneration of everyone’s labor.

The introduction of the logic of property is hard to challenge as it is furthered by commercial academic publishers. Oligopolists, such as Elsevier, are not only notorious for using copyright protections to extract usurious profits from the mostly free labor of those who write, peer review, and edit academic journals,²² but they are now developing all sorts of metadata, metrics, and workflow systems that are increasingly becoming central for teaching and research. In addition to their publishing business, Elsevier has expanded its ‘research intelligence’ offering, which now encompasses a whole range of digital services, including the Scopus citation database; Mendeley reference manager; the research performance analytics tools SciVal and Research Metrics; the centralized research management system Pure; the institutional repository and pub-

22 Vincent Larivière, Stefanie Haustein, and Philippe Mongeon, ‘The Oligopoly of Academic Publishers in the Digital Era’, *PLoS ONE* 10.6 (10 June 2015), <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0127502/>.

lishing platform Bepress; and, last but not least, grant discovery and funding flow tools Funding Institutional and Elsevier Funding Solutions. Given how central digital services are becoming in today's universities, whoever owns these platforms *is* the university.

Third, the migration online of the academic syllabus falls into larger efforts by universities to 'disrupt' the educational system through digital technologies. The introduction of virtual learning environments has led to lesson plans, slides, notes, and syllabi becoming items to be deposited with the institution. The doors of public higher education are being opened to commercial qualification providers by means of the rise in metrics-based management, digital platforming of university services, and transformation of students into consumers empowered to make 'real-time' decisions on how to spend their student debt.²³ Such neoliberalization masquerading behind digitization is nowhere more evident than in the hype that was generated around Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), exactly at the height of the last economic crisis.

MOOCs developed gradually from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) initial experiments with opening up its teaching materials to the public through the OpenCourseWare project in 2001. By 2011, MOOCs were saluted as a full-on democratization of access to 'Ivy-League-caliber education [for] the world's poor.'²⁴ And yet, their promise quickly deflated following extremely low completion rates (as low as 5%).²⁵ Believing that in fifty years there will be no more than 10 institutions globally delivering higher education,²⁶ by the end of 2013 Sebastian Thrun (Google's celebrated roboticist who in 2012 founded the for-profit MOOC platform Udacity), had to admit that Udacity offered a 'lousy product' that proved to be a total failure with 'students from difficult neighborhoods, without good access to computers, and with all kinds of challenges in their lives.'²⁷ Critic Aaron Bady has thus rightfully argued that:

[MOOCs] demonstrate what the technology is not good at: accreditation and mass education. The MOOC rewards self-directed learners who have the resources and privilege that allow them to pursue learning for its own sake [...] MOOCs are also a really poor way to make educational resources available to underserved and underprivileged communities, which has been the historical mission of public education.²⁸

Indeed, the 'historical mission of public education' was always and remains to this day highly contested terrain—the very idea of a public good being under attack by dominant managerial techniques that try to redefine it, driving what Randy Martin

23 Ben Williamson, 'Number Crunching: Transforming Higher Education into "Performance Data"', *Medium*, 16 August 2018, <https://medium.com/ussbriefs/number-crunching-transforming-higher-education-into-performance-data-9c23debc4cf7>.

24 Max Chafkin, 'Udacity's Sebastian Thrun, Godfather Of Free Online Education, Changes Course', *FastCompany*, 14 November 2013, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3021473/udacity-sebastian-thrun-uphill-climb/>.

25 'The Rise (and Fall?) Of the MOOC', *Oxbridge Essays*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/rise-fall-mooc/>.

26 Steven Leckart, 'The Stanford Education Experiment Could Change Higher Learning Forever', *Wired*, 20 March 2012, https://www.wired.com/2012/03/ff_aiclass/.

27 Chafkin, 'Udacity's Sebastian Thrun'.

28 Aaron Bady, 'The MOOC Moment and the End of Reform', *Liberal Education* 99.4 (Fall 2013), <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/mooc-moment-and-end-reform>.

aply called the ‘financialization of daily life.’²⁹ The failure of MOOCs finally points to a broader question, also impacting the vicissitudes of #Syllabus: Where will actual study practices find refuge in the social, once the social is made directly productive for capital at all times? Where will study actually ‘take place’, in the literal sense of the phrase, claiming the resources that it needs for co-creation in terms of time, labor, and love?

Learning from #Syllabus

What have we learned from the #Syllabus phenomenon?

The syllabus *is* the manifesto of 21st century.

Political struggles against structural discrimination, oppression, and violence in the present are continuing the legacy of critical pedagogies of earlier social movements that coupled the process of political subjectivation with that of collective education. By creating effective pedagogical tools, movements have brought educators and students into the fold of their struggles. In the context of our new network environment, political struggles have produced a new media object: #Syllabus, a crowdsourced list of resources—historic and present—relevant to a cause. By doing so, these struggles adapt, resist, and live in and against the networks dominated by techno-capital, with all of the difficulties and contradictions that entails.

What have we learned from the academic syllabus migrating online?

In the contemporary university, critical pedagogy is clashing head-on with the digitization of higher education. Education that should empower and research that should emancipate are increasingly left out in the cold due to the data-driven marketization of academia, short-cutting the goals of teaching and research to satisfy the fluctuating demands of labor market and financial speculation. Resistance against the capture of data, research workflows, and scholarship by means of digitization is a key struggle for the future of mass intellectuality beyond exclusions of class, disability, gender, and race.

What have we learned from #Syllabus as a media object?

As old formats transform into new media objects, the digital network environment defines the conditions in which these new media objects try to adjust, resist, and live. A right intuition can intervene and change the landscape—not necessarily for the good, particularly if the imperatives of capital accumulation and social control prevail. We thus need to re-appropriate the process of production and distribution of #Syllabus as a media object in its totality. We need to build tools to collectively control the workflows that are becoming the infrastructures on top of which we collaboratively produce knowledge that is vital for us to adjust, resist, and live. In order to successfully intervene in the world, every aspect of production and distribution of these new media objects becomes relevant. Every single aspect counts. The order of items in a list counts. The timestamp of every version of the list counts. The name of every contributor to

29 Randy Martin, *Financialization Of Daily Life*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.

every version of the list counts. Furthermore, the workflow to keep track of all of these aspects is another complex media object—a software tool of its own—with its own order and its own versions. It is a recursive process of creating an autonomous ecology.

#Syllabus can be conceived as a recursive process of versioning lists, pointing to textual, audiovisual, or other resources. With all of the linked resources publicly accessible to all; with all versions of the lists editable by all; with all of the edits attributable to their contributors; with all versions, all linked resources, all attributions preservable by all, just such an autonomous ecology can be made for #Syllabus. In fact, Sean Dockray, Benjamin Forster, and Public Office have already proposed such a methodology in their *Hyperreadings*, a forkable `readme.md` plaintext document on GitHub. They write:

A text that by its nature points to other texts, the syllabus is already a relational document acknowledging its own position within a living field of knowledge. It is decidedly not self-contained, however it often circulates as if it were.

If a syllabus circulated as a HyperReadings document, then it could point directly to the texts and other media that it aggregates. But just as easily as it circulates, a HyperReadings syllabus could be forked into new versions: the syllabus is changed because there is a new essay out, or because of a political disagreement, or because following the syllabus produced new suggestions. These forks become a family tree where one can follow branches and trace epistemological mutations.³⁰

It is in line with this vision, which we share with the *HyperReadings* crew, and in line with our analysis, that we, as amateur librarians, activists, and educators, make our promise beyond the limits of this text.

The workflow that we are bootstrapping here will keep in mind every aspect of the media object syllabus (order, timestamp, contributor, version changes), allowing diversity via forking and branching, and making sure that every reference listed in a syllabus will find its reference in a catalog which will lead to the actual material, in digital form, needed for the syllabus.

Against the enclosures of copyright, we will continue building shadow libraries and archives of struggles, providing access to resources needed for the collective processes of education.

Against the corporate platforming of workflows and metadata, we will work with social movements, political initiatives, educators, and researchers to aggregate, annotate, version, and preserve lists of resources.

Against the extractivism of academia, we will take care of the material conditions that are needed for such collective thinking to take place, both on- and offline.

30 Sean Dockray, Benjamin Forster, and Public Office, 'README.md', *Hyperreadings*, 15 February 2018, <https://samiz-dat.github.io/hyperreadings/>.

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YIANNIS COLAKIDES,
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State Machines

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