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Recommended Citation

Sorby, Angela, "The Syllabus as Handwork" (2020). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 552.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/552

THE SYLLABUS AS HANDWORK

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ARTICLE: THE SYLLABUS AS HANDWORK

I propose that through the process of hand-illumination, the syllabus might emerge as a unique artifact, even (or especially) in the context of online education. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin anticipates our digital moment with a quote from Paul Valery: "Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign" (219). Benjamin finds democratic promise in the forces of reproduction, but also peril; he argues that an original artifact has an "aura" rooted in a nexus of space, time, and experience. Inspired by Benjamin's *Illuminations*, some versions of my online Introduction to Creative Writing course begin with an illumination exercise.

After viewing medieval and modern embellished texts (the *Book of Kells*, Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*), students are asked to hand-color, illustrate, and annotate a print copy of their syllabus. On past syllabi, I have encountered flora, fauna, callout boxes, anxious little questions, and ancient Greek phrases in blue crayon. However, what matters most are not the pictures but the processes of handwork and proprioceptive engagement. I request a (phone-snapped) photo of each completed artifact, but they keep the originals. An illuminated syllabus is a text that has been physically transformed from a massified bureaucratic instrument into a one-of-a-kind artifact with a history and even, I venture, with an aura.

Illumination generates a specifically aesthetic version of what Hutchins calls a "material anchor" linking mental and material structures through the medium of the hand. Mueller and Oppenheimer have proposed that handwriting, rather than keyboarding, results in deeper cognitive processing and better retention. To illuminate is to amplify the benefits of handwriting by foregrounding individual creativity. Each student must decide what they find worth illustrating, highlighting, or questioning. The power dynamic shifts as "my" syllabi become "their" artisanal objects, marked by their strengths and vulnerabilities. (Although I have not yet needed to use it, I also have a vocal-illumination plan to accommodate disabilities.) To advocate for illuminated syllabi is not to devalue digital learning spaces, but rather to suggest that multimodal environments can be enriched—cognitively and affectively—by one-of-a-kind aesthetic anchors drawn by hand.

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