

The Promising Syllabus Enacted: One Teacher's Experience

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The purpose of this report is to describe a rationale and strategies for use of the Promising Syllabus (in Bain, 2004, What the best college teachers do). This syllabus reflects the learner-centered paradigm where students take charge of their own learning. The syllabus creates a series of promises between teacher and student, focusing on a question—or questions—of significance the course will help the student answer. Allowing students input into the direction and evaluation of their learning challenges current pedagogy. A Promising Syllabus was used in COM 365, Organizational Communication. This report explores the use of the Promising Syllabus and one teacher's attempt to challenge students to take ownership of their learning experience.

Overview: What is the Promising Syllabus?

The Promising Syllabus grew out of research done by Bain (2004)¹ in which he asked for best practices of outstanding college teachers. The syllabus reflects the learner-centered goal of encouraging students to take charge of their own learning by creating a series of promises between teacher and student. The syllabus guides course participants by focusing on a current social or disciplinary question of significance that the course will help the students to answer. Allowing students input into the direction and evaluation of their learning challenges some current pedagogical practices but can lead to exciting classroom experiences, such as the one reported herein.

The promising syllabus, as outlined in Bain (2004), focuses on “beyond the classroom” learning. In part, it is a response to a changing view of teaching, that is, a movement from “teaching as telling” (the Instruction paradigm) to a recognition that in the process of learning, “the chief agent . . . is the learner” (the Learning paradigm) (Saulnier, Landrey, Longenecker, & Wagner, 2008, p. 170). As Saulnier et al. succinctly assert:

If the Instruction Paradigm faculty member is an actor—a sage on a stage—then the Learning Paradigm faculty member is more like a facilitator; that is, more like

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coach interacting with a team. If the model in the Instruction Paradigm is that of delivering a lecture, then the model in the Learning Paradigm is that of designing and then playing a team game. A coach not only instructs football players, for example, but also designs the football practices and the game plan; he participates in the game itself by sending in plays and making other decisions. (p. 170)²

While in no way attempting to trivialize the purpose of education, following the facilitator/coach metaphor, the syllabus is a symbolic “game plan.” Like any game plan, it cannot create great players, but it can provide a framework in which great play—and, in this case, learning—can take place. Such was my earnest hope when I employed the promising syllabus (see Appendix A).

Three primary components comprise the promising syllabus. These components reframe the standard syllabi’s introduction, policy, assignments, and points sections. The first is, “What this course promises you”³ wherein students are presented with the promises or opportunities the course offers, including key questions the course will help students answer. This section involves framing the learning as enabling students to wrestle with current topical or significant discipline specific problems. For example:

In recent years, organizations have been rocked by scandals: fiscal mismanagement, breach of trust, lying to shareholders and, ultimately, legal prosecution in many instances. . . . Who is responsible when big business transgresses? Are we really part of the problem? Can we be part of a solution? This semester, we will be examining the question: *What is the role of ethics in organizational communication?* You will have the opportunity to explore the most recent research on organizations, on the communication and the actions of people within them. You’ll be able to understand the basic nature of an organization and learn about communication patterns that can make or break groups that form and exist to serve a purpose. (COM 365 Syllabus, Spring 2007)

In the second section—“How will you fulfill these promises?”—students are challenged to view learning as a result of their commitment and effort: “To realize these promises, you must take responsibility for your own learning and participate as an active learner. You need to become part of a learning community.” Expectations for reading, writing, and thinking in the course are overviewed.

Finally, “III. Here begins a conversation about how the teacher AND student will best come to understand the nature and progress of the student’s learning (formerly known as grading policy).” This section involves a promise from the instructor: “I want to help you think about and understand your own learning and thinking so that you can better take charge of that learning. In the course of the semester, I will help develop that understanding of your learning and thinking.” This section also affirms an obligation from the student: “At the end of the semester, you should be able to assess your own work and make an argument about where you are in your learning.”

While based on Bain’s (2004) interviews of successful teachers, using a promising syllabus requires a fundamental reevaluation of pedagogy as the teacher no longer focuses on syllabus-assignments-points-expectations, but rather on learner-centered process and evaluation. Evaluation becomes both formative—allowing students to

submit multiple, ungraded drafts of assignments, and summative, with the faculty member coevaluating the student's argument about his/her learning progress.

Rationale

While there is great seduction in the conventional norm of teachers as authorities, parsing knowledge to alternately willing and recalcitrant minds, current focus on learning- or learner-centered environments challenges both teacher and student. Bain (2004) makes a persuasive argument for understanding knowledge as constructed, not received, and focusing on the benefit of intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards. This is interpreted, through the Promising Syllabus, as encouraging the student to see the practical benefit of wrestling with questions ("What is this course promising you? How does this fit your experience of life?"), as well as the commitment required ("How will you fulfill these promises? How will you show you have learned?"). The teacher becomes *primarily* a mentor rather than an evaluator, a fellow learner rather than a harsh judge, a supporter to the student who focuses on his/her own learning needs, learning styles, and abilities.

The learner centered paradigm and the promising syllabus are particularly well suited to a communication classroom because they fundamentally understand that learning is through the communicative doing. Asking questions and seeking answers is the basis for learning.

At this point, there is a caveat: this is tough work. To accept the goal of empowering students in an academy whose structure is hierarchical, whose very nature involves reified power structures—one individual rendering judgment upon the performance of others—is an uphill struggle. Where there is judgment, there is power, and the promising syllabus cannot erase that. No matter how I coach, cheer, validate, and attempt to motivate, at the end of the semester, mine was the hand that recorded the grade. Moreover, a much longer analysis than this would be required to truly discuss the very real resistance some students felt at shaking the boughs of knowledge: "Just tell me what I need to know" is the elephant in the classroom. Despite the push back, it is a rare teacher who has not seen literal enlightenment, when a student makes the concept his or her own. The promising syllabus format requires a concrete commitment on the part of the teacher to take a different path to that enlightenment (and I ruefully acknowledge it sometimes involves pushing and pulling students up the mountain). Thus, the syllabus is no more, nor less, than a tool.

Process

I attended a workshop with Ken Bain as he discussed his research and introduced the concept of the Promising Syllabus. Enthusiastic about the idea, yet nervous about ceding so much control into the hands of students, I adapted the document for my Organizational Communication (COM 365) course. To help myself feel anchored in this brave new world, I incorporated the syllabus, with permission, almost verbatim from the Montclair website suggested by Bain. I have since used

variations of the syllabus in courses as diverse as Female–Male Communication, Interpersonal Communication and Community Formation, and Communication Ethics; and used the central question premise in a large-lecture Foundations of Communication survey course.

I began the Organizational Communication class with a syllabus sketch: there was a text, there was a basic plan for the first few weeks of the semester, there was a clear announcement to students that my goal was for this to be a very different class experience for them. They also knew they would be responsible for making a case for their grade (see Appendix A). I would provide non-graded feedback through the semester, but their obligation would be to present a case for their final grade. They would write two papers: first, a mini ethnography analysis of an organization with which they were involved; second, a focused research paper on a topic that dealt with communication, ethics, and organizations. We would discuss rubrics and expectations [beyond the paper's length; roughly 5 pages each] as the semester went on.

At the beginning of the semester, I divided the class into small groups and explained that each group would present a chapter from the course text. This allowed us a common vocabulary for the semester, introduced organizational communication theory, and began the semester by making students responsible for their teaching/learning. It was not what “I” thought was key, but what “they” recognized as important, significant, and worth sharing as we moved to our common goal of answering the question “what is the role of ethics . . .” I offered a lecture on ethics, specifically ethics as viewed from an organizational perspective using May (2006). We also spent a week creating a grading rubric for written papers. I then showed the DVD documentary *The Corporation* (2005) as one view of corporate reality and responsibility. My goal was to promote thought, dialogue, and response. Students were provided with a series of questions to consider as they viewed the film (Appendix B). The reaction was beyond what I could have expected.

The DVD influenced students at a visceral level: they were enraged, shocked, horrified, and in disbelief. We spent a week discussing the implications for them of accepting—or rejecting—the views presented in the documentary, the impact on their understanding, choices, and sense of personal versus corporate ethical responsibility. Following a heated discussion, they decided that ultimately individuals, not corporations or organizations, bear the responsibility to act in an ethical manner. The majority of the students decided that they wanted to take some form of action in response to what they had seen. As teacher/facilitator, I asked them to find a concrete way to take action or to focus on a product rather than to merely be upset.

At that point, the course changed. As a group, we/they decided that, rather than research scholarly journals, they would research websites: they would critically examine links provided in the documentary. Their task was to create criteria and a common rubric for evaluating each website in terms of its stated goals, affiliations, and history. They looked for and rated the potential for individuals' participation as active problem-solvers; whether or not sites accepted advertising revenue; whether the sites

were advocates, recruiters, or information warehouses. From their class-created rubric, they would create a group project reporting on what the websites offered; a sort of “how to become involved” manual for those who were concerned about topics presented in the documentary. The five topics, which later became the foci for the research groups, were: sustainable living, preserving democracy, protecting the food chain, fair trade, and ethical perception management. Of the 33 students enrolled in the course, only three students decided to write an original paper as outlined in the syllabus rather than participate in the research project.

The other 30 students divided themselves into the aforementioned five groups. They decided their final product would be a spiral bound resource manual for classmates or other students who wanted to become involved as socially responsible/ethical consumers, citizens, and corporate or non-profit employees. Each student would be responsible for critically examining three to five websites and reporting their results in a common analytic format. The class devised this format, including and welcoming input from the three students who decided not to participate in the group work. Each group had one student who acted as a sort of captain (again, their choice of language), who would receive the analysis from group members, make sure it fit into the common format, and forward it to two “editors.” The editors emerged from the class to handle the coordination and organization of the final project. Students also designed the cover. One student worked at a copying establishment. She researched quotations to include in the finished project. Students could choose to help pay for the cover and binding of the report by contributing up to two dollars each. My department made copies of the actual content. Each section was identified by a colored divider, and each section provided the name and contact information of the individual researcher who conducted that portion of the analysis.

During the final week of class, the three students who elected not to become involved in the group project reported on their individual research papers. Additionally, each group presented an overview of what they collectively found. They created Power-Point, film clips, or summary handouts of their research. Often, the groups presented live access to their “Top Five” websites along with a rationale for that ranking. For the last class period, students met at a local restaurant to celebrate the publication of their combined project: every student left class with a spiral bound, 180-plus page manual for social activism in the internet age. As a result of the experience, each student was empowered to actively participate (some quite passionately) in his/her own learning. In 15 years of teaching, I have never seen such enthusiasm and commitment. And me? I crossed my fingers, held my breath, and went along for the ride.

Best Practices: Strategies for Incorporating the Promising Syllabus into the Communication Curriculum

What follows are several suggestions for succeeding with the promising syllabus in communication courses based on my experiences, observations, and reflections.

(1) Emphasize the different focus of the course, that is, on the student, on learning, and on the question

The promising syllabus can be disconcerting when first presented to the student. It upends the wisdom-laden-instructor/passive-receptacle-of-knowledge-student paradigm in ways that can make students very uncomfortable. For the first few weeks of class, individual students would frequently ask “But what do you want me to *do*?” as though guessing what the professor wants was the criteria for success [it *isn't*?]. It was startlingly reminiscent of what Bain (2004) refers to as “plug and chug” where students succeed by “memorizing formulae, sticking numbers in the right equation or the right vocabulary into a paper, but understanding little” (p. 24). Not knowing exactly what the papers are to look like or the exact dates when they are due, or what exactly is involved in earning an A, B, or C in the class can produce stress.

I spent a great deal of time reminding students that this course was about two primary ideas: growing in understanding about what helps *them* learn, and using that knowledge to help them answer questions of significance in their world. Many were, and probably remain, uncomfortable with having the focus turned on them and their responsibility and commitment to learning, rather than on the comfortable content-first approach where guessing the one right answer is the fallback position.

(2) Offer a foundational vocabulary

When students are firmly grounded in the language of the discipline, in this case organizational communication, they have a common framework for analysis. It allows students to say “This seems to be a different view of organizations than what X says. This one makes more sense.” It provides them with the building blocks for their analysis, and also eases them into the brave new world of the Promising Syllabus by beginning with familiar presentations of terms and concepts.

(3) Facilitate, facilitate, facilitate

A communication climate of acceptance is crucial to prompt the kinds of risks students are asked to make by inverting the traditional paradigm. Asking questions, encouraging and supporting all attempts, and creating an atmosphere where failure is part of success requires listening and a continuous focus on the process of learning. It requires suspending the “I have the answers” mode in which many teachers are inculcated. It requires patience as students struggle to be reflexive thinkers. The goal is to facilitate the students’ learning about their own learning, and give them a focus—the semester question—upon which to polish their new knowledge.

Also, assisting student understanding of what a grade “means” is important: facilitating their creation of a grading rubric helps them articulate their semester-end grade and allows them to articulate reasons in an argument that goes beyond “I worked really hard and so deserve an A.” I provided writing samples and encouraged them to examine, share, and discuss how each should be evaluated and *why*. We then

generated a rubric and distributed it. Having participated in that creation allowed them not only a rubric reference, but a language with which to frame their argument later in the semester.

(4) Be prepared to let the students make decisions

This was, perhaps, the most difficult aspect. There is such blessed comfort in knowing each lecture. When sharing *my* knowledge, I have confidence in the accuracy of what I say. There is little room for negotiation. It is hard to encourage students to own their learning if the instructor is unwilling to share that ownership. Taking the time to talk about pedagogy, about the action of learning, about student responsibility for more than reading and guessing the correct answer, can be challenging and frustrating. Organizational communication literature tells us that group work routinely produces better, richer answers with increased buy-in by participants. In many senses, the learner centered paradigm as practiced through the promising syllabus, can seem to make the students a group and the teacher a facilitator whose job is to keep focused on the question to be answered—which is not necessarily bad. One drawback to group work is the time commitment to reach consensus decisions. This is certainly true of my experience with the promising syllabus. Facilitating good decision making is a communicative skill that takes practice.

Finally, focusing on the question, which is so central to the promising syllabus, reframes the act of education from “me owning” to “we owning.” Even in a lower level foundations courses where learning dates, theories, and concepts is important, the course can be guided by an overarching question that encourages students to see the practical benefit of engaging in the work of creating, analyzing, and answering questions that is at the heart of scholarship.

(5) Ask a question for which you do not have an answer

I offer a very general list of potential course-specific questions (see Appendix C). The main suggestion I offer is to ask a question for which you do not have an answer. Let answering the question be a task you share with the students. I had a general idea what the answer would be to “What is the role of ethics in organizational communication?” but I knew there could be many variations. I was able to truly share the process of answering the question with my students. I could sincerely ask “How can we work together to answer this question?”

(6) Require a major project that allows students to illustrate what they know

The major individual project was a portfolio whose final feature was the argument for a grade. The specific format for that argument is presented on the third page of the attached syllabus. In the portfolio, each student included examples of his or her work over the course of the semester and offered claims of improved understanding(s).

They also had an opportunity to hand in a draft copy before the deadline for an ungraded review and discussion with me.

Conclusion

In an era when student feelings of entitlement can foster a perception of adversarial relationships between faculty and students, encouraging students to accept responsibility for their own learning might be one of the best ways to reframe active learning from teacher/instruction centered to student/learning centered. The Promising Syllabus is one tool to accomplish reframing. It focuses on the benefits and responsibilities of each student to themselves, their learning, and the community of learners. It allows a faculty member to be a resource and a guide rather than a demigod.

The Promising Syllabus approach is not risk free, nor is it less work than a “regular” syllabus. In fact, it requires *more* upfront, sometimes painful, self-reflection and pedagogical goal analysis. For example, what is your bottom line requirement for the class—what do you want them to take away? Is that achievable without the standard lecture format? Does your department have strict guidelines concerning testing, written work, assessment procedures? How comfortable are you with not requiring quizzes to reassure that students are reading? How comfortable are you with ambiguity? How strong are your facilitation skills? How open are you to negotiation with students? I had to wrestle with each of these questions, and I was wrong on some of my answers—but that is the subject of another paper.

Finally, using any particular syllabus, including the Promising Syllabus, does not guarantee success. But when this approach works, it is intellectually invigorating and offers glimpses of a new way to help students sell themselves on the joy of learning in and out of the classroom—skills that will help remake the future.

Notes

- [1] Bain (2004) conducted a 15-year study of nearly 100 faculties in a variety of disciplines and schools. Bain’s primary criteria for excellence highlights teachers who “achieved remarkable success in helping their students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel” (p. 5). Bain refers to a “natural critical learning environment” (p. 18) where students “learn by confronting intriguing, beautiful or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality” in which, among other key concepts “learners feel a sense of control over their education . . . work collaboratively with others” (p. 18).
- [2] For a good outline and discussion of assessment, including guidelines, please see Saulnier et al. (2008). Such a discussion, while essential, is beyond the scope of this report.
- [3] All syllabus examples taken from my own COM 365 Syllabus, are taken liberally, with permission, from the example at <http://www.montclair.edu/center/promisingsyllabushr/default.htm>

References and Suggested Readings

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Appendix A: COM 365: Organizational Communication Spring 2007*Texts*

- Miller, K. (2006). *Organizational communication: approaches and processes* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

*I. What this course promises you:**

In recent years, organizations have been rocked by scandals: fiscal mismanagement, breach of trust, lying to shareholders and, ultimately, legal prosecution in many cases. And these scandals haven’t just hit “corporate America”—churches have lost their pastors; teachers have been fired for inappropriate behavior; fraternities and sororities have been banned from campuses; the basic family is changing as new data indicates more than 50% of American

women are not choosing marriage. What's going on? How did these events happen? Why? Were the "organizations" "sick?" Who is responsible when big business falters? Are we really part of the problem? Can we be part of a solution?

This semester, we will be examining the question: **What is the role of ethics in organizational communication?**

You will have the opportunity to explore the most recent research on organizations, on the communication and the actions of people within them. You'll be able to understand the basic nature of an organization, and learn about communication patterns that can make or break groups that form and exist to serve a purpose. You'll gain insight into the role of the individual in an organization, learn how to function in one, gain deeper knowledge of the critical role of communication in decision making processes, all centered around the question of ethics, of critical judgment, of evaluation of the organization and its processes and actions. You may never run an organization, but you are, and will be, part of many. This course can help you more deeply understand those organizations, so that you can make wise decisions when you join—or decide to leave—one.

II. How will you fulfill these promises?

To realize these promises you must take responsibility for your own learning and participate as an active learner. You need to become part of a learning community that we will create through engaging in the discussion of issues that are common in organizations. The best way to learn what organizations do is to spend some time in one. Part of the semester will be spent analyzing organizations you are currently—or have, in the recent past, been—involved with. You will spend time analyzing communication in that real organization, and you will collect examples that you will bring to class to share—to illustrate and enrich our discussion. You will also use that organization as the springboard for analysis. During the semester you will write a five page paper about your experiences as a member of this organization. This paper will help you get more out of the experience and it will help us—you and I—evaluate your learning, providing you with more accurate feedback. During class lectures, I will provide you with more explicit information on how to write this paper. During class, I will also provide you with lectures on key concepts and information that will also help you learn.

You will also participate in a specialized small group that will research and wrestle with aspects of organizations and their ethical obligations.

Reading, Writing, and Thinking in the Course

To take charge of your own education, you must be willing to read. We will use the text as a jumping off point, to give us a common language with which to discuss organizations. You will need to read, analyze, and think about the material between each class. There will also be additional reading and research as we wrestle with understanding the nature of ethics in an organization. Some of this you will do on your own: some will be with a group of classmates. We'll work on abstracting current research so it can be shared among the class.

You will also pursue a topic of special interest to you and write a paper about that topic. The writing of the paper will help you refine your thinking and understanding. If you do not learn to communicate in words, you cannot formulate fully developed thoughts and will, instead, live by the vague impressions and emotions that often substitute for ideas.

By the end of the course, you should be able to make an informed analysis of the organizations in your life: about the communication involved, about the implications of

organizational decisions on you and your life; and about the ethical responsibility you—and the organization—mutually share. It is a big task, and it will take all our efforts to achieve it.

III. Here begins a conversation about how the teacher AND student will best come to understand the nature and progress of the student's learning (formerly known as grading policy)

I want to help you think about and understand your own learning and thinking so that you can better take charge of that learning. I will help develop that understanding of your learning and thinking. There will be more than one opportunity for you to submit work, and have it examined, prior to assigning an evaluation. You will keep track of your progress and be encouraged to meet with me frequently to monitor your progress.

At the end of the semester, you should be able to assess your own work and make an argument about where you are in your learning (remember, an argument is not just conclusions but evidence offered in support of conclusions). Here are some guidelines for the self-assessment that will help you make that argument. You should attach the following to the front of your argument:

Purpose: I understand that the purpose of this activity is to assess my own performance across the term. If successful, this report will make it possible for those who read it to grasp explicitly what I have and have not learned this term in the way of thinking abilities. It will itself display critical thinking about my thinking. I will begin by stating the grade which I believe that I have the evidence to support. I will build a case for my grade using the criteria below and excerpts from my own work as support. (Note: Ironically, a well-reasoned case for you to get a low grade may well justify you getting a higher grade, while a poorly-reasoned and weakly-supported case for getting a high grade will certainly guarantee a lower grade. The most impressive response will be an accurate assessment of your strengths and weaknesses leading to the well-substantiated conclusion that you deserve the grade you do in fact deserve.)

Overall Course Goals and Objectives: The goal of the course is to develop thinking abilities and the knowledge and understanding that result from their use in the study of questions and issues. More specifically, by the end of the course I will be able to 1) articulate an answer to the central question of the semester (What is the role of ethics in organizational communication?); 2) phrase my answer in the form of an argumentative statement (*x* because of *y*); 3) provide reasons and evidence that support my claims and 4) locate that support in current scholarly literature, supplemented by examples drawn from my own lived experience.

My areas of strength: I am best at the thinking abilities listed below. In each case, I will attach evidence from my work along with accompanying analysis and commentary.

- (1)
- (2)
- (3)
- (4)

My areas of weakness: I am weakest at the thinking abilities listed below. In each case, I will attach evidence from my work along with accompanying analysis and commentary.

- (1)
- (2)

(3)

(4)

If the course grade is to be based on how well I develop thinking abilities and the knowledge and understanding that result from their use in the study of questions and issues, my grade should be a _____.

Attached is a summary of the reasoning on which I base my judgment.

*This “Promising Syllabus” is based largely on work from: Bain (2004) and <http://www.montclair.edu/center/promisingsyllabushr/default.htm>

Appendix B

Things to think about while watching the documentary *The Corporation*:

- (1) What are some ethical issues you noticed?
- (2) Are there any solutions proposed to any ethical issues?
- (3) Do you think the same issues might be experienced by not-for-profit organizations?
- (4) What is the point of view of the corporation presented? By filmmakers? By interviewees?
- (5) What is your overall impression/opinion about the documentary? Strengths? Weaknesses? Suggestions for improvement?
- (6) What stands out as an exemplary section? As particularly good? Particularly bad? Why?
- (7) General observations/comments/concerns/criticisms:

Appendix C: Sample Course Specific Questions to Center the Promising Syllabus

Interpersonal Communication

How can communication help build successful short and long term relationships? Is there a “right” and “wrong” way to do relationships—and what can studying communication offer us?

Health and Risk Communication

How can an understanding of communication facilitate health communication? What are the benefits to individual and society, to employee and client/patient, of understanding and applying communication theory and skills?

Crisis Communication

How does an understanding of communication help us be proactive agents for our organizations? How do we, as communicators, negotiate ethically sticky boundaries between truth and spin?

Public Speaking

How will the skills I learn in a public speaking class be worth a million bucks to me? How will the skills I learn in a public speaking class change the foundation of my life and relationships

(including dating, future career, becoming an intelligent consumer of goods and ideas) and overall make me a superstar?

Political Communication

Message ‘schmessage’—how can studying communication help me see behind the mask and beneath the rocks of politics?

Research Methods and Communication Theory

What are the everyday benefits of understanding and interpreting research reports? How can moving communication theory from the textbook to your daily life help you become a superhero?

Organizational Communication

What is the role of ethics in organizational communication and what are the implications for future employees? If I’m going to spend the majority of my life working, how can I make that work worthwhile?

Male–female Communication

How do we perform gendering through communication and what are the implications?

Intercultural Communication

If we are becoming a global village, what is my role, and how can communication help me negotiate the changing boundaries of my life?

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