It’s the beginning of another academic year, and that means lots and lots of last-minute course preparation. Perhaps it’s not the best time to propose course redesign projects, but how many course assignments, problem sets, exam formats, or paper topics haven’t been changed for some time? The last time the syllabus was significantly revised was . . . when, exactly? Faculty workloads are unquestionably heavy. However, in a blog post several years ago, I proposed that busyness should not be a perennial excuse for avoiding course redesign projects, because there are ways to make those projects manageable. Here’s some ideas.

A group of science faculty describes using a commercially available, inexpensive puzzle maker (Sizzix Puzzle Maker Die No. 2) to make figures (drawings and diagrams) into puzzles. Students got six puzzles with six pieces per puzzle in each package. The figures in the puzzle pack had been discussed that day in class. Students taped the puzzle pieces together and then wrote a caption appropriate for each figure. Completion of the puzzles was not a course requirement, and the finished puzzles were not graded, although the professor read and shared feedback on them.

A syllabus provides students with information about a course and its requirements, but it also conveys messages about the instructor’s personality and hints as to how the course will be conducted. It used to be that the instructor handed out the syllabus on the first day. Along with the syllabus, student impressions were formed by the instructor’s physical presence and conduct of that first class session. Now syllabi may be posted on course websites. Students meet the instructor after having reviewed the syllabus or, in the case of online courses, there may never be a face-to-face encounter. These circumstances make paying attention to the tone of the syllabus even more important. First impressions matter. They can influence how students respond throughout the course.

Classroom observation instruments are not used all that regularly in higher education, but when they are, the focus tends to be on high-level abstractions (“The teacher was organized.”) or aggregated behaviors (“The teacher treated students with respect.”). Items like these are appropriate, but they do not identify the specific, concrete behaviors observers saw that caused them to come to these more comprehensive conclusions.