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Designing a Great Syllabus

Ken Matejka and Lance B. Kurke

At the very least, the syllabus sends a symbolic message to the students regarding your personality as a teacher and the amount of investment you have made in the course (McKeachie 1986). First impressions are so important that it would be foolhardy to ignore the opportunity to make that impression favorable. Because the syllabus is a transparent statement of the preliminary work you put into the course, it is a manageable, profound first impression.

The word *syllabus* originates from the Greek word *syllibos* and is defined by Webster as “an outline of a course of study.” A good syllabus may not seem like the most scintillating teaching topic, but it has been cited in a survey of 200 professors, administrators, and students as the component most often contributing to effective college teaching (Cooper and Cuseo 1989). Our own experiences suggest that when trouble arises in a class, the conflict often began, in some way, with the syllabus.

We have identified four distinct purposes served by a great syllabus: as a contract, a communication device, a plan, and a cognitive map.

A Contract

The syllabus represents an agreement between you and the students (Cooper and

Cuseo 1989; Lowther, Stark, and Martens 1989). As such, it is an important “legal” document.

It should be noted that it is entirely possible to make the syllabus a binding agreement by having the last page be a brief contract: “I have read this syllabus, understand its implications (and have sought clarification for those parts that were unclear to me), and will abide by it. (Signature.)”

Here are some of the suggested components for your contract.

Your Name: Pronunciation, and what you prefer to be called—Mr., Dr., Ken?

Course: Name, number, and section.

Location: Tell the students where your office is located; be explicit if it’s hidden. Provide the building and room number where all classes will be held. (Be careful to state if certain classes will be held elsewhere.)

Time: Scheduled class time and any exceptions.

Office hours: What days and hours will you always be available? The key here is accessibility. Student problems do not always neatly coincide with your office hours. Decide what your policy will be for meeting with students outside of office hours. Will you? If so, will you only meet for “official” problems or will you make yourself more broadly accessible to students, in a mentor role? Will you be accessible for personal problems? If so, acquaint yourself with services available through counseling or other university

agencies. Think carefully about possible appearances of impropriety or possible charges of sexual harassment.

Phone Number(s): At least provide your office phone and your secretary’s name and extension. You may choose (as we do) to also provide your home phone number for emergencies. Deans, chairs, and students appreciate your availability. Be careful. Students will avail themselves of this offer.

Texts: List the required texts in reference form (possibly including the current prices to help keep you aware of the current costs.) Optional texts—list and explain just how important they are.

Readings: List and suggest approximate time tables. Explain how important staying current really is. Candor is a valuable trust builder.

Instructional methods: How will classes be conducted? Will there be a pattern for each class? Set the stage to convey your desire to create a challenging environment for learning, yet one that’s fun and engaging.

Course Objective: This is a surprisingly important contractual agreement. If you think very clearly and thoroughly about what you want to accomplish, and if you convey that to your students, you will be much more likely to succeed in your teaching. At a minimum, you might consider: motives, scientific values or analytical skills, knowledge of the subject matter, attitudes toward people, communication skills, and creativity and innovation.

Testing: How many tests will be given?

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When? What types of questions, and how much will they be worth? Will the exams test memory, understanding, synthesis, logic or application (Rubin 1989)? How important are the lectures versus the text for study purposes?

Design your own tests from your lectures and the text material that you have suggested as most important. Many students privately complain to us about professors who lecture on topics and then test by using the test banks provided by the author. If professors are too lazy to create their own tests for each semester, they deserve lower student teaching evaluation scores!

Consider the possibility of not using tests. You could rely exclusively on written analysis of cases, which explicitly incorporate course material. Many students admire this approach (especially M.B.A. students) and employers find it to be more “real world.”

Grading: Will you grade on a 10 point scale (90 = A)? Will you use a curve? Will you use plus/minus grading? Will there be quizzes? Will you grade class participation? If so, how? What percentage of the grade will each of these be worth?

When will the tests be returned? How and when can students get their grades (especially the final exam)? It is well known that rapid feedback is most efficacious and greatly appreciated. You might consider a policy of always returning papers at the next class meeting. (Students are amazed and believe that you really care about them and their work.) This may mean you will make assignments due just before you have a block of time to grade.

Attendance and Participation: Will attendance and class participation be graded? How heavily?

Schedule of Class Activities: Provide an outline that contains each class meeting date, the topic for the day, and the assignments due.

A Communication Device

The syllabus is a marvelous opportunity for you to think about the course and develop an effective presentation of both your thoughts and answers to students’ anticipated questions. Try to think of the syllabus as an exercise in preventive medicine. Any information provided can save time later.

Remember that the syllabus is also communicating an overall tone or personality. A technically detailed, unimaginative, “cold” syllabus is usually a precursor of a boring class. Lighten up!

You might consider organizing a group of colleagues to create syllabi having a common format, across (all?) courses. Common formats convey to the students that the faculty are organized and hold similar high standards. You can also brainstorm and benchmark with other faculty and improve everyone’s syllabi.

Another effective mechanism for communicating your intent, seriousness, and expectations, is to distribute auxiliary documents on the first day of class. For example, you might distribute a group project assignment, a booklet of readings, or memos to guide students on case analysis and writing.

Finally, it is a good idea to make your documents look professional, with varied fonts, points, and layouts. All of your documents should have the same heading that personalizes your style. Students will be impressed.

A Plan

Certainly the syllabus should represent the overall plan of action for the course.

Course Mission: Rationale—Why does this course exist? What is the content? Why should students take this course and how will it contribute to their overall educational experience? For Example: Organizational behavior (the authors’ area of expertise) incorporates an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the behavioral interactions among the individual, the group, and the organization. Our practical emphasis will focus on the ethical, effective, and mutually profitable management of the people in goal-seeking organizations.

More specifically, with concepts from business, psychology, social-psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology serving as a foundation, we will consider the organizational implications of topics such as: perception, learning, personality, managing work force diversity, motivation, communication, group dynamics, decision-making, power, ethics, organizational structure, design and culture, con-

flict, leadership, commitment, and managing change in a global environment.

Beliefs/Values/Attitudes: What is your belief about the purpose of education? Social change? Effective thinking? Problem solving? Systematic instruction? Pragmatics? Great ideas? Vocational goals? Value development? Personal development? Insight into self?

Course Strategy: How will we achieve the course mission? What aspects of the class structure and class conduct were designed specifically to support the attainment of the mission?

Course Goals: Specify the main educational targets that this course intends to achieve. Why are these targets important?

For Example: To the degree possible in a one-semester course, organizational behavior will attempt to achieve five progressive, life-long learning goals. (We have purposely used a simplistic rhyming scheme so that you will be able to remember these five goals forever.)

TO STOW: (Memorizing) To overcome inertia by reading and storing the important conceptual theories that describe human behavior and organizations and the interactions between the two, that is, organizational behavior.

TO KNOW: (Mastering) To think about the concepts and develop a deeper understanding of the meanings and intricacies of the material as it relates to diagnosing the reasons for certain behaviors.

TO GROW: (Manufacturing) To gain a more mature practical understanding of how to apply the theories, prescribe possible solutions, determine the costs/benefits of each, and then select the best course of action.

TO SHOW: (Modeling) To show what you know. To act and exhibit the desired behavior. In the behavioral arena there is a huge difference between knowing and showing. For example, you can thoroughly memorize five leadership theories (stow), understand the five theories and their relative importance to managers (know), learn how to analyze yourself, others, and the situation and apply the correct remedy (grow), but the true test is whether you can demonstrate the knowledge (show it). Can you lead when it is needed? Can you motivate others? Managers must “walk the talk!”

TO BESTOW: (Mentoring) To teach and share your understanding with others. There is no greater professional responsibility and personal satisfaction than to give back what someone else has given to you. Mentoring is the management function of the future.

A Cognitive Map

Finally, think of your course as an educational adventure. The class is about to embark on an intellectual journey. The teacher is the guide and the only one with the cognitive map of the destination, what routes we will take, detours needed, and the method of travel. Think about how best to share this information with the students. Here are some points to keep in mind.

1. The first day of class is your chance for a good first impression. We've already mentioned the effect of the syllabus; now consider your own. We recommend over-preparing for this class—most professors completely “wing” the first day and let students go early. What impression does that convey? Think carefully about how to set the tone. Prepare some short experience that will be memorable. Involve the students, if only in a five minute writing assignment of expectations.

2. Who is the customer? What type of presentation will be effective given the audience and course? We consider our students to be our customers in many details of the course. For example, if the timing of a written case coincides with midterms, we are willing to negotiate a change, though not the nature of the assignment.

3. What will the students receive for their money? Quality? Packaging? Delivery? Servicing? What do students want to

know from the syllabus? (Content? Time? Requirements? Knowledge/skills needed? What kind of person is the professor?) Some information should be supplemented orally. For example, you may introduce yourself with a brief, professional biography, but you would not put a personal sketch in the syllabus.

4. What do the students need to know to plan their work and study schedules for the semester?

5. What roles suit your course purpose? (Expert? Social agent? Facilitator? Role model? Resource allocator? Coach? Counselor? Actor? Conductor?) What “style” or “voice” dominates your syllabus and what does it communicate to the students (Hockensmith 1988)? Does it convey enthusiasm and passion? Do you appear to be fair?

6. From your experiences with the course, what potential difficulties can you anticipate and remove through a better syllabus? Each year fix one or two things. Test the change. Repeat. Bring continual improvement into your syllabus.

7. When in doubt, why not try full disclosure? “It makes a faculty member's life easier!” (Schlesinger 1987).

8. Don't get too detailed with rules and punishments—the students often mistake rules for meaning!

9. Diagram the flow of your course and content materials (Lovell-Troy and Eickmann 1992).

10. End the syllabus on a positive, informal note (Fisch 1987).

An example of a good ending might be: “We're glad you're along to share this adventure. We will maintain as informal a classroom atmosphere as possible while upholding the principles of good education. If each of us does the work assigned, this class should be a lot of fun as well as educational. Let's have a great class!”

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