

Creating the Foundation for a Warm Classroom Climate

January 11, 2011

Although the course syllabus is often overlooked or undervalued as the first form of communication between students and their instructors, it plays an important role for both. For students, the syllabus communicates information about the course that they require throughout the semester. For instructors, it assists with planning and demonstrates to students the instructor's concerns for the course and for them (Hammons & Shock, 1994). Importantly, the syllabus creates a first impression about the instructor and his or her attitudes toward teaching (Grunert, 1997). In this column, we identify six characteristics that contribute to a warm syllabus tone, whereby instructors create a classroom environment in which they are seen as approachable and in which students become engaged. We also provide concrete examples of syllabi sections using "cold" language and improved versions using a "warm" tone.

Much has been written about how to create an effective syllabus. There appears to be widespread agreement about what the requisite components are. A good syllabus communicates to students: 1) basic information about the course and contact information; 2) course purpose including goals and objectives; 3) instructor's teaching philosophy and beliefs; 4) assignments and course calendar; 5) required and optional materials including textbooks and supplemental readings such as journal articles; 6) methods of instruction and course delivery; 7) grading procedures; and 8) learning resources for students (see Altman, 1989; Appleby, 1999; Davis, 1993; Matejka & Kurke, 1994; McKeachie, 2002; Slattery & Carlson, 2005; Suddreth & Galloway, 2006). Indeed, the presence of these areas has been part of the criteria used by Project Syllabus, an arm of The Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP), in evaluating and sharing excellent syllabi in psychology ([see http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/syllabi.php](http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/syllabi.php)).

Only recently has attention shifted from the elements of a good syllabus to *how* such information is conveyed. Students can glean the instructor's interpersonal style and approachability from a syllabus's messages about expectations for classroom climate (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Rogers & Abell, 2008; Sanz de Acedo Lizarraga, Sanz de Acedo Baquedano, Goicoa Mangado, & Cardelle-Elawar, 2009). A syllabus that talks at length about penalties for not following protocol or instructions can convey "coldness" about the instructor and the class climate, and can signal an undesirable class (Rubin, 1985; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). In contrast, a syllabus that provides course information in a positive or friendly manner can build a sense of belonging and community. A positive syllabus tone removes unnecessary and unhelpful barriers between instructors and students, making the classroom a comfortable and safe place for discovery.

The Characteristics of Warm Syllabi

Both the literature on syllabi and that on other types of motivating relationships suggest six strategies for warming syllabi (i.e., tone, rationale, self-disclosure, humor, compassion, and enthusiasm). These are illustrated in Table 1 (on pages 26-27) and discussed below.

(1) *Positive or Friendly Language*. Use positive, friendly language so students feel comfortable and

welcome. Positive or friendly language should be used throughout the syllabus, as this triggers students' implicit personality theories (Asch, 1946) about the instructor and the course. For example, note the difference in tone in the two examples of office hours, with the warm version indicating, "Individual assistance is always available by appointment. I look forward to seeing you during student hours."

(2) *Rationale for Assignments.* Providing the rationale for assignments can help motivate students by making it clear how each assignment relates to the course goals and their own learning (Zinn, 2009). Instructors can also supplement their assignment rationale with strategies to help students further develop their metacognition about their learning (e.g., providing students with strategies for monitoring and regulating their study behavior). Students will be more likely to approach coursework with zeal when they recognize the work's value and feel able to succeed. For instance, in the example on Optional Readings, the "warm" instructor notes, "too often students simply accept what they see in a text as truth without critically evaluating the information," and suggests that students will have a different experience in this course.

(3) *Self-Disclosure.* One way a syllabus can facilitate a warm and inviting classroom environment is through the sharing of personal experiences that lead to liking (Collins & Miller, 1994). For example, Sorenson (1989) argued that self-disclosure in the classroom, whether it is relevant to subject content or not, can provide insight into an instructor's interpersonal style. As in the warm example on Learning Resources (i.e., "We've all needed help in something at some point in our lives."), this can be minimal, yet effective. The examples also create positive self-disclosures by speaking in first person (e.g., "I developed..." "My hope...").

(4) *Humor.* Humor or not taking oneself so seriously can help with tone, but humor can be tricky and requires tact (see Pollio, 2002). Mester and Tauber (2004) suggest, "to be effective, humor need only be pertinent, brief, tasteful and nonhostile" (p. 161). There is no reason why a syllabus cannot contain a cartoon, joke or anecdote about the course topic matter. Indeed, humor seems to be characteristic of master teachers and an indicator of their enthusiasm for their disciplines (Buskist, 1998). Humor can capture attention to important details in the syllabus and increase motivation for learning the course material (e.g., in the section on Teaching Philosophy, the instructor notes that she cannot make students eat what she prepares, but that she hopes they come to class hungry).

(5) *Compassion.* Compassion is perhaps best illustrated in the attendance policy, when acknowledging unexpected (and unwelcomed) life events. Instructors should strongly encourage students to attend class while also acknowledging that unforeseen events may occasionally prevent perfect attendance. In such cases, where the student is experiencing illnesses, death in the family or other traumatic events, a supportive word may be needed. Providing a limit on the number of missed classes is acceptable, with the syllabus noting that when students surpass the allotted excused absences, they are overextended and it may not be the best semester in which to take the course.

(6) *Enthusiasm.* Use the syllabus as an opportunity to show your students your passion for teaching and for your subject matter (e.g., in Course Goals, "Think for a moment about how test scores impact people's lives — in schools, jobs, health, and many other important domains of life. Understanding test scores is vital..."). Enthusiasm has been found to foster active learning and student engagement (Patrick, Hisley, & Kempler, 2000). Other research has shown that student-rated instructor enthusiasm is positively correlated with other aspects of student-rated teaching effectiveness (e.g., structure of the

course) and with self-ratings of student learning (Jackson et al., 1999).

Conclusions

In this column, we have attempted to provide a list of the prominent characteristics of a warm and inviting syllabus. We encourage instructors to review their syllabi for warmth to help their students feel welcome, comfortable, and excited about their courses. As Rubin (1985) noted:

... [I]f students could be persuaded that we are really interested in their understanding the material we offer, that we support their efforts to master it, and that we take their intellectual struggles seriously, they might respond by becoming more involved in our courses, by trying to live up to our expectations, and by appreciating our concern. (p. 56)

Providing friendly and positive language in the syllabus promotes understanding between students and teachers and sets the stage for a rewarding educational experience for all. Other aspects of a warm syllabus, such as infusing humor, compassion, and enthusiasm about the course, helps students immediately connect with the professor and course.

Furthermore, transparency regarding the rationale for assignments and appropriate self-disclosure within the syllabi help students recognize an approachable professor who is open to questions and discussions. Overall, a conscious effort to construct a syllabus warm in tone is a small investment with far reaching benefits for a successful course.

Additional examples of exemplary syllabi that convey warmth are available at the [Project Syllabus website](#).

Table 1

Examples of Cold and Warm Syllabus Sections

	Cold	Warm
<i>Office Hours:</i>		