

How to Improve Your Teaching With the Course Syllabus

May 01, 1994

Did you ever have a student misunderstand an assignment, express surprise that you had considered attendance important, or want an explanation of how you grade after the final exam has been scored and the semester is over? If, like most teachers, you receive a few such remarks every semester, you already appreciate the need for clarity in your communication with students.

One of the best ways to clarify such communication is through your course syllabus. As a teacher, you have probably distributed thousands of them and no doubt have written a score or more, yet often the syllabus is given little serious attention. But as Rubin (1985) has pointed out, “We keep forgetting that what we know—about our disciplines, about our goals, about our teaching—is not known (or agreed upon) by everyone. We seem to assume that our colleagues and our students will intuitively be able to reconstruct that creature we see in our mind’s eye from the few bones we give them in the syllabus” (p. 56). A poorly written and incomplete syllabus can frustrate both students and teachers and disrupt the whole learning process.

One of the easiest ways to improve your teaching is to increase the communication effectiveness of your syllabi. To do this, you need to understand the purposes of a course syllabus and its essential elements.

The Purpose of a Course Syllabus

The course syllabus serves at least seven basic purposes (Rubin, 1985). Some of these directly serve your students and are readily apparent to them. But as you will see, the syllabus should serve some of your needs as well. In summary, a syllabus:

Helps Plan and Clarify Your Course

The very process of writing a well-constructed syllabus forces you to crystallize, articulate, organize, and communicate your thoughts about a course. This thought and writing produces what Gabbanesch (1992) calls the enriched syllabus, which compels you to publicly reveal your previously well concealed assumptions. In other words, it makes explicit that which was implicit, and it is the implicit that often confuses and frustrates students.

Try inviting a person who has no expertise in your academic area to critique your syllabus. You will be surprised by the number of vagaries and gaps the naive reader will identify. Teachers can easily overlook important matters or be unclear about them in their syllabi, even after they have taught the course for years.

Introduces You to Students

Your syllabus allows you to share your pedagogical philosophy. Students may not perceive it in quite

this way, but that is one of the things you achieve through the syllabus. A syllabus tells your students whether you view learning as an active or passive process and whether you emphasize knowledge enhancement, skill building, or a combination of both.

The syllabus reveals how your course is structured (e.g. simple to complex or chronologically) and should include the purpose of the organization. Syllabi tell your students if the parts of the course are mutually exclusive or whether success in its later stages depends upon skills mastered earlier. The syllabus also reveals your teaching style. Are you organized or disorganized, flexible or rigid, rigorous or lax?

The tone of your syllabus can indicate how approachable you are, and students often form an immediate impression of whether they will like you—and your course—from reading the syllabus. Needless to say, it is better if the impression is positive.

Explains Why Students Should Take Your Course

After students read your syllabus, they should know how your course satisfies departmental or institutional requirements, how it fits into their major, or why it is a valuable elective. Is the course a prerequisite for more advanced courses? How would you define the course (e.g. introductory, intermediate, or capstone level)? You may want to indicate who can benefit from the knowledge and skills acquired during this course. Faculty know the answers to these questions—or at least they should—but it is a mistake to assume that students do. If you do not clearly state the purpose and value of your course, your students may believe the main purpose of taking it is simply to fulfill a poorly understood curricular requirement.

Explains the Various Aspects of Your Course

Your syllabus should be explicit about assignments and methods of evaluation. Tell your students how your assignments will enable them to accomplish course objectives. Specify elements such as criteria for excellence in assignments, the number and nature of tests, and the weighting of assignments in determining the final grade.

Do not forget to communicate the level of participation required. Will your students listen passively as you lecture or should they expect to participate in challenging discussions requiring advance preparation? Similarly, will the emphasis be on primary or secondary materials and why? You might also want to explain the difference between primary and secondary sources.

A syllabus should also specify prerequisites, both in terms of courses and prerequisite skills or experiences your students will need to do well. If you expect students to perform certain skills, will you teach these skills during the course or will you assume your students already possess them when they enter the course?

Explains How Students Will Develop by Successfully Completing Your Course

Students should understand what content they will learn, what skills they will develop, and what attitudes, values, and feelings may change as a result of taking the course. Including such information

will help you develop some well considered course objectives, if you have not already done so.

Communicates the Course's Nature and Content to Faculty/Administrators

In addition to informing your students, a good syllabus provides a record of your course for colleagues who may teach it later. It can also aid departmental and institutional curriculum planning, and assist outside agencies in assessing your program's goals and effectiveness.

Provides a Documented Record of Your Teaching Career

Your course syllabi are an important teaching legacy. They often provide the only permanent record of your teaching philosophy, commitment to teaching, and pedagogical innovations. If you keep old copies of your course syllabi and read several years' worth at one sitting, you can easily see how you have developed as a teacher. This growth and development is often striking.

When job hunting, syllabi are also integral components of the application portfolio. They can also serve as salary, promotion, and tenure documents that evaluation committee's request when assessing teaching ability. A good syllabus can be as important to you as to your students—unless, of course, you are an independently wealthy tenured professor.

22 Lessons Learned

The Essential Components of the Course Syllabus

Once you know the purpose of the syllabus, its basic elements are easily defined. The following may serve as a simple checklist as you review syllabus content.

Basic Identifying Information

Include the name of your institution, the semester, year, course title and identifying code, location and time of class meetings, and the credits earned for successfully completing the course.

Instructor's Personal Information

Include your name and title, office location, office telephone number, office hours, and email address if students can communicate with you via that medium. Some instructors include their home telephone numbers, but may specify restrictions in calls to their homes (e.g., no calls between 10PM and 8AM).

Texts and Other Materials

Specify the titles, authors, and editions of your texts, differentiating between required and recommended status. It is wise to specify locations for obtaining course materials (e.g., bookstore, library, your office, or computer lab), the conditions for obtaining them (e.g. whether they must be purchased, are on two-day reserve, or are cleared for photocopying), and the number of copies available (e.g., for reserved materials).

Course Description

This usually comes directly from your institution's catalog and should include a brief description of the following items: the major topics covered; the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired; prerequisites; and any special opportunities (e.g., field trips).

Course Objectives

This section is of particular importance because of the current emphasis on the assessment of student learning outcomes. Clearly state your objectives. I recommend Gronland's 1991 publication, *How to Write and Use Instructional Objectives*, if you are unsure of how to write objectives in this manner. Objectives can be cognitive (e.g., understands the nature-nurture controversy), affective (e.g., appreciates the role of psychology in everyday life), or behavioral (e.g., can administer an IQ test). A clear set of instructional objectives provides direction for instructional methods, yields guidelines for testing, and communicates instructional intent to students.

Course Requirements

Explain exactly what a student is expected to do in your course including a clear description of the tests administered, the papers written, and the oral presentations made.

Course Calendar

Your calendar contains the dates of specific lecture topics, reading assignments, exams, and deadlines for papers and other projects. Any changes to your calendar should be supplied to students in writing.

Grading Procedures and Scales

Make explicit your procedures and criteria for evaluating students' performance and assigning grades. Clear policies regarding extra credit, make-up tests, deadlines, and penalties for post-deadline work are necessary. Include an academic honesty policy with definitions of academically dishonest behaviors (e.g., plagiarism and cheating) and sanctions for their occurrence if your school does not emphasize this concept in its literature (i.e. catalog).

Caveat

A syllabus is written contract between you and your students. End each syllabus with a caveat, such as the following, to protect yourself, your department, and your institution if changes in the syllabus must be made once your course is underway: "The above schedule and procedures in this course are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances" (Altman, 1989).

It is imperative that all teachers adhere faithfully to the policies and requirements set forth in their syllabi. Do *not* forget the reciprocal nature of this contract. By requiring students to abide by the rules and procedures spelled out in your syllabus, you are also agreeing to do the same. A well written syllabus will make these expectations clear to all concerned. You should plan to discuss the syllabus in detail during the first class meeting. This brings up the need for prompt distribution of syllabi. They

should be available on the first day of class, not a week or a month into the semester. After all, if you expect students to meet deadlines for examinations and other course requirements, you should also meet your own teaching deadlines, and distributing the course syllabus during the first class meeting is one such deadline you should not miss.

Conclusion

Good syllabi fulfill specific purposes, possess essential components, and answer crucial questions. However, few syllabi perform all these functions equally well. My advice is this: try to write syllabi that are as brief and focused as possible, but that communicate the nature of your course to students in a clear and understandable manner. The better your students understand the purposes and procedures of your course, the more likely they are to enter enthusiastically into the learning partnership you offer them.