Writing a Syllabus

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”

(Alice in Wonderland, Chapter VI, p. 64; Carroll, 1960)

Introduction

Etymologically syllabus means a “label” or “table of contents.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines syllabus as outline of a course of study. We agree that a syllabus should contain an outline, and a schedule of topics, and many more items of information. However, we suggest that the primary purpose of a syllabus is to communicate to one’s students the course the student is about, why the course is taught, where it is going, and what will be required of the students for them to complete the course with a passing grade.

Most of this paper will list suggestions from the literature about what information might be included in your course syllabus. It is extremely unlikely that you will include everything listed. We suggest two criteria in deciding what information to include. First, include all information that students need to have at the beginning of the course; second, include all information that students need to have in writing. We believe that any really important information about the course should be in writing. However, it may be better to introduce some information later in the term, e.g., the details of a required project. To attempt to include every single item of importance in your syllabus is to insure that the students will not read much of it.

To the experienced teacher, probably few of the items listed in this paper are likely to come as a surprise. However, Lowther, Stark, and Martens (1989) found in their interviews with faculty and in their examinations of syllabi that “obvious” items were often omitted. At the very least we hope this IDEA Paper will provide the reader with a useful organization of what is already known.

In compiling the list of items of information that might be included in a syllabus, we started with an unpublished article by the first author—an abbreviated version of which appeared in The Teaching Professor (Altman, 1989). We found additional items in other publications (Birdsall, 1989; Lowther, Stark, & Martens, 1989; Millis, no date; Wilkerson & McKnight, 1978). There was surprising agreement about the major areas of information to be included in a syllabus.

Major Content Areas of a Syllabus

Course Information. The first items of information in a syllabus should give course information: course title, course number, and credit hours. Also, are there any prerequisites? Is the permission of the instructor required? Include the location of classroom, and the days and hours class/lab/studio/etc. meets.

Instructor Information. Second, the students need information about the instructor: full name, title; office location (and where to leave assignments), office phone number; office hours. Depending on the size of the class (and other factors), it may be desirable to include an emergency phone number; quite often this can be the number of the department office. Many instructors give the students their home telephone number. If you do, it is well to also list restrictions, e.g., “No calls between 10:30 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. please.” If you are helped by teaching assistants or other instructors, their names, locations, and phone numbers should also be listed.

Texts, Readings, Materials. College-level instruction—at least in the United States—is heavily dependent upon the use of print material, if not a required textbook, then a variety of readings. These are becoming increasingly costly. The syllabus should provide the students with detailed information about the following.

Textbook(s)—include the title, author, date (and edition), publisher, cost, where available, (often it is appropriate to indicate why the particular text was chosen and/or how extensively it will be used).

Supplementary reading(s)—in addition to the detailed bibliographic information about the readings, the syllabus should indicate whether the readings are required or only recommended, and whether the readings are on reserve in the library or available for purchase in the bookstore. Sometimes instructors make their own books available to

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students. If this is the case for the given course, that
information might be included in the syllabus along with
whatever conditions apply to their use.

Materials—although many courses use only print
material, there are a myriad of courses that require addi-
tional—sometimes expensive—materials, e.g., lab or safety
equipment, art supplies, special calculators or even
computers, etc.

Course Description/Objectives. The treatment of this
area—variously called course description, content, goals, 
objectives—differed more than any other in the publications
we reviewed.

The bare minimum would be to repeat the description in
the college’s catalog—assuming that it describes the
course with some accuracy. Certainly a paragraph describ-
ing the general content of the course—and even a
sentence or two on why the course is important—would not
be excessive. Information about Instructional methods,
e.g., large lecture with small discussion sections, may also be
included here.

Some instructors, who have developed detailed instructional
objectives, include them in their syllabi. Such inclusion may
result in information overload for some students. However,
the inclusion of general course goals (e.g., the learning and
application of the general principles of . . . , or the develop-
ment of the skill of . . . , or the development of a more positive
attitude toward . . . ) can help orient the students to the
purpose of the course, the instructor’s expectations, etc.

Course Calendar/Schedule. Some instructors are con-
cerned that, if they include a daily—or weekly—schedule of
topics to be covered, they can be held legally liable if they
depart from it. One remedy for this is to state that the
schedule is tentative and subject to change depending upon
the progress of the class. In many cases the instructor has
only limited flexibility about scheduling anyway, e.g., in a
multisection course where departmental exams are adminis-
tered on specific dates, or in a course which is a prerequisite
for another course (the material has to be—should be—
covered by the end of the course). If we expect students to
meet our deadlines, to plan their work, we must give them the
information needed for such planning.

The calendar or schedule should also include the dates for
exams, quizzes, or other means of assessment. (We are not
implying that all evaluation of students must be in
groups and at the same time. A course in college reading
might require that the students be videotaped while
teaching a class, so the syllabus could say “to be sched-
uled individually.”)

The calendar should also include due dates for major
assignments. For example, when a paper is due; if the topic
has to be approved, when; if an outline or draft is an interim
step, when it is due.

Finally, any required special events need to be included in
the calendar, e.g., a lecture by a visiting speaker, a dramatic
or musical performance, a field trip.

Course Policies. Every discussion of syllabi we read
included something about course policies, although what
specifically was included varied. We suggest the following
topics.

Attendance, lateness—at least for freshman and
sophomore classes, and perhaps for all undergraduate
classes, the syllabus should include some statement about
attendance (is it required, will students who attend regularly
be given a break if the grade is borderline?) and about
lateness, at least if it is penalized. (Students who arrive
late disturb the class, but on some campuses it is not
possible for a student to get from one part of the campus to
another within the allotted time: sometimes our colleagues
do not let the students leave promptly.)

Class participation—in the medieval lecture hall, class
participation was not an issue, but if students are to learn to
apply, analyze, synthesize, etc., they need to be active. Such
approaches are contrary to the experiences—and prefer-
ences—of many students. If active participation is expected,
the syllabus needs to say so. It also needs to explain if/how
participation will be graded.

Missed exams or assignments—since these affect
grades, they are of interest to students. Syllabi should inform
the students whether exams and assignments can be made
up; statements regarding earning extra credit should also be
included if that is an option.

Lab safety/health—in some courses these issues can
literally be a matter of life or death. Even if detailed materials
are handed out early in the course, the syllabus should
include a short statement about the importance of these
issues and indicate that more detailed information will follow.

Academic dishonesty—in some syllabi this is treated as a
separate area. The syllabus should address questions related
to cheating and plagiarism. On campuses where these topics
are treated in detail in a student handbook, it is sufficient for
the syllabus to simply refer the students to that handbook.
In the absence of such a resource, details in the syllabus are
necessary. Many students actually do not know what
constitutes plagiarism. We owe it to the students to explain
what is considered to be plagiarism or cheating.

Grading—this topic, even more than academic dishonesty,
is often treated as a separate area. Given the students’
interest in grades, such treatment is certainly defensible.
Each syllabus should include details about how the students
will be evaluated—what factors will be included, how they will
be weighted, and how they will be translated into grades.
Information about the appeals procedures, often included in a
student handbook, is also appropriate at least for freshman
and sophomore classes.

Available Support Services. Most college courses have
available to the students a considerable variety of instructional
support services. We often bemoan the fact that the students
do not avail themselves of these services. Perhaps this is
because we do not draw their attention to the possibilities.
The library is probably the oldest resource, and perhaps still
the richest. Including a brief statement in the syllabus
identifying collections, journals, abstracts, audio or video
tapes, etc. which the library has which are relevant to the
course would be appropriate. If the institution has a learning
center, making the students aware of its services can be of
real benefit to students. In today’s world computers are
becoming almost a necessity. Most campuses have some
terminals, if not personal computers, available for student use.
Many courses have other support services unique to them.
Briefly describe what is available in the syllabus, or tell the
students where they can get detailed information.
Beyond the Syllabus

While reading this paper it has undoubtedly occurred to many of you that our suggestions often are based on certain assumptions about what is appropriate for a course or what constitutes effective teaching. You are, of course, correct. "Before the Syllabus" would really be a better title for this section. If one of the main purposes of a syllabus is to communicate to the students what the course is about, it presumes that we have some idea about what we think the course should accomplish. It requires that we have planned the course.

Other than commenting generally on the content of the course, most writers do not raise special questions about the underpinnings of the course. Lowther's et al. (1989) Preparing Course Syllabi for Improved Communication is a significant exception. They list educational beliefs as a separate area, including beliefs about students, beliefs about educational purpose, and beliefs about the teaching role. This concern will come as no surprise to those acquainted with the work of Stark, Lowther, and their colleagues at NCRIPtal studying course planning. In addition to the above publication, the following are suggested for the reader who wishes to read on the topic in depth (Peterson, Cameron, Mets, Jones, & Ettington, 1986; Stark, & Lowther, 1986; Stark, Lowther, Bentley, Ryan, Martens, Genthon, Wren, & Shaw, 1990; Stark, Lowther, Ryan, Bomotti, Genthon, Haven, & Martens, 1988; Stark, Lowther, Ryan, & Genthon, 1988; Stark, Shaw, & Lowther, 1989).

For readers wishing a single book, Diamond's (1989) Designing and Improving Courses and Curricula in Higher Education is a thorough one volume treatment on course design. For something even shorter (79 pages), try Gronlund's (1985) Stating Objectives for Classroom Instruction. For something very short, but still thought provoking, complete the "Teaching Goals Inventory" in the forthcoming Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo & Cross, in press).

First we—individual instructors, faculty groups, curriculum committees—must plan the course, must decide where we want the student to get to. Then the syllabus is one way to tell the students which way they ought to go.

References


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