

DESIGNING A MOTIVATIONAL SYLLABUS

Creating a Learning Path for Student Engagement



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HISTORY, VALUE, AND PURPOSE OF THE SYLLABUS

THERE ARE MANY REASONS to think very strategically about your course syllabus. Researchers have found that strong course design has been linked to positive outcomes such as increased student satisfaction, retention, and achievement of student learning outcomes in college (Rienties & Toetenel, 2016; Stewart, Houghton, & Rogers, 2012). In addition, student engagement and motivation have long been linked to higher levels of achievement at the college and university level (Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006; Waschull, 2005). As Goodman and colleagues (2011) discovered, students who have higher levels of motivation are more likely to exert more effort on tasks, which in turn leads to higher levels of academic achievement. Knowing the important connection between motivation and achievement, faculty constantly try different teaching and learning techniques aimed at increasing student engagement and motivation. One very powerful and often overlooked motivational tool is the course syllabus.

When professors use the syllabus as a vehicle to share their passion for their discipline and their desire for students to be successful, students become much more excited about the course and learning new content and skills. In other words, the positive energy generated by the faculty member about the course can be contagious. For example, professors can communicate why the course content matters and the benefit of learning the knowledge and skills described in the course learning outcomes. Similarly, when professors use the syllabus to clearly map out a learning path for their students and identify meaningful assignments and learning activities designed to help students achieve the course learning outcomes, students can immediately see the value of learning tasks. Students appreciate

it when faculty provide details about the learning tasks and their value, perceiving both the course and the professor in a more positive manner when details mapping out the learning path are provided (Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015).

As the syllabus is typically presented on the first day of class, or sometimes even prior to the start of the semester, it is the first opportunity faculty have to set the stage for future student success. As students begin a new semester, they often experience a variety of emotions. For instance, students may be excited about a new, fresh start and look forward to the learning journey. However, students may also be apprehensive and unsure of what this new learning experience will be like for them. A motivational syllabus that maps out the learning path can foster positive emotions and engagement right from the start of the semester. In other words, the syllabus can set the tone for the positive learning experience that will take place throughout the semester.

Developing or revising a syllabus is also an excellent opportunity for faculty to get excited or reenergized about the course. Thinking seriously about the learning possibilities for the semester can be a very engaging experience for faculty. Taking time out prior to the start of the semester to carefully consider what types of learning activities and tasks will best assist students with achieving the course learning outcomes is time well spent. In addition to this being a motivating task for faculty, creating or redesigning a syllabus is also a planning opportunity. Mapping out the learning path for students will save faculty time throughout the course of the semester. When a well-developed plan has been outlined in the syllabus, faculty will be able to devote their time to implementing effective teaching practices and working with students on an individual basis rather than focusing energy on issues related to course design and assignment development. Perhaps the most rewarding part of a redesigned syllabus that motivates and clearly maps out the learning path is that students will be more likely to achieve at high levels. There is nothing more rewarding than watching students grow and excel!

Unfortunately, many faculty see preparing the syllabus as a mundane ritualistic task of itemizing rules, expectations, and due dates that must be followed or completed each semester rather than as an exciting opportunity to map out the path of learning for students. Because faculty members have numerous responsibilities, of which teaching may not even be the primary focus, many faculty approach the task of revising a syllabus as a clerical one, primarily changing the due dates to reflect the current semester. Some faculty may perceive that they do not have much control over the content and design of the syllabus, as there may be departmental or

institutional templates that must be used. As a result, faculty may overlook the importance of this document or view the purpose of this document in a very narrow way, primarily focusing on the syllabus as a document that communicates expectations.

In addition, many faculty view the syllabus primarily as an agreement or as a contractual vehicle to communicate policies. When faculty focus on policies, this can result in a syllabus that has a legalese feel to it. In other words, the syllabus becomes a long list of dos and don'ts rather than a document that focuses on course value, goals, and activities (Wasley, 2008). Rubin (1988) referred to those who create syllabi with a long list of rules about topics such as missing class and turning in work late as "scolders." Scolders view the syllabus as a legal document, a contract of sorts that students latch onto so they can follow the rules of the course. Rubin (1988) also discovered, when working on general education requirements at the University of Maryland, another type of syllabi writers: the "listers." The listers are those faculty members who are trapped into an even older meaning of the syllabus, merely listing readings or topics in some order that is apparent only to them, the syllabus writers.

Reconceptualized as a motivational tool, the syllabus can be an extremely useful resource for students and an opportunity for faculty to think critically about the course as a whole. Faculty can use the syllabus to map out the learning path for students and as a mechanism to start building a learning community within the course. When faculty create a new syllabus, or revise an existing syllabus, it is the perfect opportunity to step back and reflect on the purpose of the syllabus and how to make the most of this important resource. In essence, the syllabus can be used as a motivational course design tool, communicating to students the goals of the course and the path students can take to meet with success. When faculty view the syllabus as a potential tool to enhance the learning experience in terms of motivation, communication, accountability, and curriculum mapping, the end product will be one that will best serve students and faculty. In other words, the syllabus needs to be thought of not as a set of rules and expectations but rather as the foundational document that sets the stage for student success and acts as a planning tool for faculty.

HISTORY OF THE SYLLABUS

The purpose and use of the syllabus has evolved over time. In the seventeenth century, a syllabus was basically a table or index in a book. In the eighteenth century, the term *syllabus* entered the academic realm and

became a list of subjects or lectures to be covered in a course (Snyder, 2010). At the turn of the twentieth century, the syllabus became more comprehensive and longer in nature, in part due to the proliferation of photocopying machines in the 1960s that made them easier to reproduce (Snyder, 2010).

One of the most significant shifts related to the content and structure of syllabi was seen in the 1980s when teaching theorists touted the syllabus as a powerful teaching tool, adding many of the conventional elements that we see today, such as learning outcomes (Wasley, 2008). Since that time, teaching and learning professionals have been advocating that the syllabus could be much more than a simple overview of the course, arguing that students would benefit from a syllabus that had more extensive information on assignments, expectations, and resources related to the course. Ganon (2016) and Matejka and Kurke (1994), for instance, suggested that in addition to communicating expectations, the syllabus could also be used as a planning tool or cognitive map for the course. Others have argued that the syllabus could also be used to encourage, guide, and support students (Grunert O'Brien, Millis, & Cohen, 2008; Palmer, Wheeler, & Anece, 2016).

SYLLABUS AS CONTRACT METAPHOR

One of the most commonly held beliefs about the syllabus is that it is a contract between the professor and the student. But a syllabus is not, in fact, an enforceable contract, as several court cases have concluded (e.g., *Collins v. Grier*, 1983; *Gabriel v. Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences–Vermont Campus*, 2012; *Miller v. MacMurray College*, 2011, as cited in Kauffman, 2014). Kauffman (2014) reiterated that a contract is an agreement, but not every agreement is a contract. A contract must have consideration before it is enforceable, and there is nothing a student gives to a faculty member to constitute consideration (Kauffman, 2014). Consideration is the benefit that each party gains from a contract, such as when you pay for an item at a garage sale and the seller gains money. Many in higher education are tempted to say that the student pays for an education and the faculty member gains a salary, but that contract is between the university and the student and the university and the faculty member, not between the faculty member and the student. In addition, if liability is the legal concern, then the only liability on a faculty member would be if his or her “conduct is alleged to be arbitrary or capricious or to constitute bad faith” (*Collins v. Grier*, 1983, as cited in Kauffman,

2014). It follows that the syllabus should set up a classroom environment that is fair and equitable to all students, should have clearly stated policies and procedures, and should be honest and not misleading. The biggest takeaway from this discussion is that the syllabus has been challenged on legal grounds that it acts as a contract, and to date the syllabus has not been found in courts to be a legally enforceable contract between a faculty member and a student.

Some faculty who view the syllabus as a contract ask their students to sign the syllabus, indicating that they have read and agree to the expectations described. Slattery and Carlson (2005) noted that this practice was even highlighted as a best practice in the literature. However, having students sign the syllabus as if it were a contract is no longer being touted as an exemplar practice because of the tone it sets for the class.

Beyond the fact that a syllabus has not been treated as a contract in our legal system, the “syllabus as a contract” metaphor has negative consequences. Wasley (2008) stated, “A syllabus bloated with legalese and a laundry list of dos and don’ts have turned the teacher–student relationship into an adversarial one” (para. 10). In essence, a long list of rules sends the message that you believe your students are going to engage in inappropriate actions, so it is your job to communicate the rules and potential consequences for breaking them. Although rules and policies are important, Singham (as cited in Wasley, 2008) stated that focusing on rules and policies “turns the classroom into a quasi-courtroom, with students and professors on opposing sides” (para. 48). This goes against everything we think the relationship should be between a student and a professor and has the potential to start the course on a negative tone even before the first class meeting.

Communicating expectations in a more positive way results in better outcomes. Littlefield (1999, as cited in Slattery & Carlson, 2005), for example, found that students were more likely to remember information in a warm, student-friendly syllabus compared to a less student-friendly syllabus. Relatedly, Palmer and colleagues (2016) found, “When students read a learning-focused syllabus, they have significantly more positive perceptions of the document itself, the course described by the syllabus, and the instructor associated with the course” (p. 44). The learning-focused syllabi in this study had a positive, inviting tone, especially in the policy and expectation section. One example of positively stated policy information is “Once in class, it is expected that students will be attentive, including taking notes, and that students will show respect to their classmates and the instructor” (Palmer et al., 2016, p. 41). Another example of a positively stated policy can be found in the Appendix, which contains a sample

syllabus. The academic integrity policy in the “Important Policy Information” section on page 157 begins by stating, “All students are expected to engage in academically honest work” and then goes on to talk about the importance and benefits of academic integrity. This contrasts with other syllabi that have a more negative approach, focusing on behaviors students need to avoid and the consequences for not doing so. Perry (2014) added, “Using the business model of a contract gets in the way of learning” (para. 3), and we couldn’t agree more. The contract metaphor does not serve teaching and learning goals well.

VALUE OF THE SYLLABUS

Learning is a complex process. There are a number of resources available to help students learn and achieve course goals. As the professor and expert in the field, you are the most important resource. On the basis of your subject matter and pedagogical expertise, you design learning experiences for your students that will help them achieve the learning goals of the course. Throughout the semester, you make yourself available to students to answer their questions and provide assistance with tasks as needed. In addition, you also select and create resources that will support students throughout this learning journey. First and foremost, you determine, perhaps in collaboration with faculty colleagues in your department, the learning outcomes or goals for the course. You also determine the types of assignments or assessments that will provide evidence that students have achieved these learning goals. Finally, you determine what resources, such as the textbook or other materials from the vast literature in the field, and learning activities will best assist students with learning the course content and achieving the goals of the course. The course syllabus is your one resource that pulls it all together and clearly communicates the course goals and learning path.

The syllabus is often the first introduction your students will have to you and your class. Many of us send our syllabus to students via e-mail prior to the start of the semester or post the syllabus in our course learning management system or on the website, giving students the opportunity to see the syllabus prior to meeting us in person. In this case, the syllabus can provide students with an introduction to the course. More specifically, the syllabus communicates the purpose of your course, maps out the learning path for your students, and establishes how you see your role as the course instructor. Some students may even make decisions about whether they

will take your course based on the syllabus, as the syllabus can provide a good overview of the course and your teaching approach.

In addition to serving as an introduction to the course, the syllabus is a resource that students can use throughout the semester. Smith and Razzouk (1993) found that the majority of students reported using their syllabus regularly, with 57% indicating that they used their syllabus at least once per week. When a syllabus contains detailed information about assignments, it is more likely that students will regularly refer to it. In these cases, students will view the syllabus as an important resource that will help them meet with success. For example, students will often consult the syllabus to know how to prepare for class, stay on track with due dates, and get guidance on major assignments. Thus, the syllabus has tremendous value to students.

The syllabus is also helpful to faculty. A well-designed syllabus helps faculty stay organized and focused on achieving the learning outcomes. Faculty can review the course schedule to determine if the class is on track and whether adjustments to the schedule are needed. When faculty have clearly articulated policy and assignment expectations, it is also likely that they will receive fewer e-mails with questions. As a result, time with students can be spent on tasks more meaningful than simply clarifying assignment expectations. In other words, creating a syllabus that clearly communicates an overview of the course and specifics related to expectations can be useful from a time management perspective. Although it takes more time to develop a comprehensive and useful syllabus, time can be saved later because students will likely have fewer questions about assignments and other course expectations.

In addition to being a valuable tool for students and faculty, the syllabus can be of benefit to administrators and support personnel. Syllabi provide administrators with a snapshot of the various approaches used in different courses and help them better understand what skills are being targeted for development. Knowing the academic expectations, support services such as the library and tutoring can use this information to guide the services provided. For instance, if using the library databases is an academic skill that is expected, librarians can offer workshops on this topic or develop online tutorials. Likewise, if papers or presentations require students to evaluate information, tutors can be trained on how to best assist students with developing this important cognitive skill. Syllabi can also be reviewed or used by others outside of the college. For instance, four-year colleges often review syllabi from community colleges to determine how courses align for transfer purposes.

Another example of syllabi being used by an outside agency is accreditation. Accrediting bodies may want to review syllabi as part of their analysis because syllabi provide a quick window into the teaching and learning practices at the institution (Doolittle & Siudzinski, 2010). Habanek (2005) and others pointed out that accreditors look specifically for evidence of curricular alignment and program integrity in the syllabus, as accreditors can't observe actual teaching.

PURPOSE OF THE SYLLABUS

Professionals in the teaching and learning field have identified a wide array of purposes of the syllabus. We believe that the syllabus is a powerful document that can serve several functions. The following are three purposes that have been identified in the literature:

1. *Communication tool.* Fornaciari and Dean (2014) stated that one of the primary purposes of the syllabus is to communicate. Others such as Ganon (2016) have agreed, focusing on how faculty can use the syllabus to share an overview of the course and their teaching philosophy and expectations of students. Communicating expectations via the syllabus can prevent misunderstandings (Matejka & Kurke, 1994).
2. *Planning tool.* Another primary purpose of the syllabus is to communicate the course learning outcomes or goals and explain how these goals will be reached through various assignments and activities (Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008). Some researchers have even referred to the syllabus as a cognitive map for the course (Ganon, 2016; Matejka & Kurke, 1994).
3. *Motivational and supportive tool.* Palmer and colleagues (2016) argued that creating a learning-focused syllabus can “positively affect student motivation before students even enter the classroom, making meaningful engagement in the course much more likely” (p. 36). Grunert O'Brien and colleagues (2008) also stated that the syllabus can be used to encourage and guide students, providing students with information and resources to assist them with achieving successful outcomes. Parkes and Harris (2002) noted that the syllabus is a resource for learning.

A Communication Tool

Communication is one of the primary purposes of the syllabus. Rubin (1988) stated, “An inadequate syllabus is a symptom of a larger

problem—the lack of communication between teachers and students” (para. 8). Effective faculty–student communication can begin with the syllabus. Students look toward the syllabus to gain a better understanding of the course and what will be expected of them as students in the course. The syllabus should communicate the importance of the course and the knowledge and skills that will be learned as a result of participating in the course. Rubin (1988) argued that a good syllabus provides you with answers to questions such as the following: Why take this course? What are the learning goals or outcomes? What is expected of students in the course? In other words, the syllabus is a tool to share the purpose and learning goals of the course with students. Palmer and colleagues (2016) said that the entire focus of the syllabus should be on course goals, learning activities, and resources available to assist students so that they can meet with success.

In the sample syllabus in the Appendix, you’ll see several examples of how learning is integrated throughout the syllabus. One example of how to focus on learning is provided in the “What Is This Course All About?” section of the sample syllabus in the Appendix (see page 152). In this section of the sample syllabus, you will see not only an overview of the course but also an emphasis on the learning outcomes and course content areas. The “What Can I Expect to Happen During Class?” section of the sample syllabus, found on page 154, demonstrates how students may be informed about the different learning experiences that will take place throughout the semester and why these approaches will increase learning. On pages 155 and 156 there is also an entire section on “The Best Way to Study/Learn (According to Research!).”

Palmer (2017) argued that the syllabus is an opportunity to be transparent with students by providing them with a clear overview of the course and expectations. Matejka and Kurke (1994) stated that the syllabus is a “transparent statement of the preliminary work you put into a course—it is a manageable, profound, first impression” (p. 115) of your vision for the course. Research has shown that first impressions can be long lasting. For instance, Buchert, Laws, Apperson, and Bregman (2008) found that the impressions that students formed of their professor very early on in the semester, during the first two weeks, were consistent with their evaluations at the end of the semester. In a similar study, Laws, Apperson, Buchert, and Bregman (2010) found that students formed long-lasting impressions of their professors after the very first class where professors discussed course expectations. Using the syllabus as a way to excite students about the course can help them develop a positive impression about the course and professor and increase student engagement. Further

emphasizing the motivational role of the syllabus, Ganon (2016) argued that we can use the syllabus to invite students “to become active learners in our courses” (p. 1). This is consistent with Ken Bain’s (n.d.) promising syllabus concept, where he focuses on promising students an intellectually rewarding experience.

In addition to sharing course goals and activities, you can also use the syllabus to communicate your teaching philosophy and to help your students understand what teaching approaches, such as discussion or group activities, will be used throughout the semester and why you use them (Ganon, 2016). A teaching philosophy can give students a sense of the learning environment, including how learning activities will be structured. This can give students a clear picture of the learning experience. In the sample syllabus (Appendix), you will find one example of how to include a teaching philosophy statement in the syllabus (see page 153). In this example, a photo of the professor adds a personal touch, and the text in this section communicates the professor’s beliefs and a general overview of the teaching approach that will be used.

A syllabus that clearly communicates course information and expectations demonstrates to students that we have made significant investments in planning the course, and students typically appreciate our efforts (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014). Likewise, having a positive tone and including a teaching philosophy can make you more approachable and increase student motivation (Palmer et al., 2016). Thus, students will appreciate and benefit from our efforts to create a more engaging and effective syllabus.

Another analogy is to view the syllabus as preventative medicine. In other words, use the syllabus as a communication tool that can prevent or at least minimize confusion or conflict (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). When you have clearly articulated policies and expectations, it is less likely that students will need to ask you questions, and when they do, you can use the policies as a guide for responding (Wasley, 2008).

A Planning Tool

Another syllabus metaphor that is often used is the syllabus as a cognitive map (Ganon, 2016; Matejka & Kurke, 1994). We believe this is a particularly strong metaphor. Through the syllabus, faculty can share not only the learning outcomes but also the direct connection between the learning tasks and assignments and the identified learning outcomes. An example of how tasks may be tied to outcomes is located in the “Course Outline” section of the sample syllabus in the Appendix (see page 159). In this example, the course outline has learning objectives, and the purpose and learning goal for each lesson is clearly articulated and linked to the overall

course learning outcomes. After each learning objective for the day's lesson, you'll see that the course learning outcome is referenced in parentheses. This approach is also used for the assignments listed in the "Grading Information" section on page 164.

To accomplish this linking, faculty can use a backward design approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to designing their syllabus and course. The backward design approach requires you to design the course with the end in mind. In other words, first focus on the learning outcomes or goals you have identified for the course. Then, determine what types of assignments would provide you with evidence that students successfully achieved the learning outcomes, and finally, focus on the best teaching methods that will help students achieve the outcomes. We'll explore the use of the backward design approach to syllabus construction more deeply in the next chapter.

In addition to communicating the overall plan for the course, the syllabus can provide a detailed road map, outlining the steps that students will need to take to be successful in the course. Habanek (2005) said that laying out the course schedule shows that you have a plan for the course and that you want students to see that plan—that this isn't some aimless adventure. Use the syllabus to map out the learning path in your course.

A Motivational and Supportive Tool

Research has shown that motivation and engagement are powerful predictors of success (Goodman et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2006; Waschull, 2005). Given this knowledge and the concern about retention and graduation rates across the nation, many colleges and universities have addressed the importance of motivation via professional development opportunities, encouraging faculty to incorporate active learning techniques into their classrooms. Although there is no doubt that the classroom is the best place to engage students, the syllabus can also be used for this purpose.

Slattery and Carlson (2005) argued that the syllabus can most definitely be used as a motivational tool. For example, providing students with action-oriented learning goals and information on how to meet these goals with success can inspire and motivate students. Palmer and colleagues' (2016) research on syllabi further supports the motivational role that syllabi can play. Specifically, the results of their study indicated that students who encountered a learning-focused syllabus viewed the course as more interesting and relevant and the professor as more caring and supportive. According to these researchers, "Learning-focused syllabi are characterized by engaging, question-driven course descriptions; long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals; clear, measurable learning objectives; robust

and transparent assessment and activity descriptions; detailed course schedules; a focus on student success; and, an inviting, approachable, and motivating tone” (p. 36). In another study, Ludy and colleagues (2016) also found that the syllabus could function as a motivational tool. In this study, students responded to a survey after reviewing a syllabus that had more of a contractual feel versus one that was designed to be more engaging. The more engaging version used images and visual tools to package the course content into a more visually appealing document. Results indicated that students who reviewed the engaging syllabus were in fact more interested in the course and also viewed the professor more positively. Specifically, students in this study viewed the professor associated with the engaging syllabus as more encouraging, enthusiastic, and approachable as compared to students who viewed a syllabus that had a more contractual feel (Ludy et al., 2016).

There are various ways to increase motivation via the syllabus. The sample syllabus in the Appendix shows how images designed to motivate students might be used on the very first page of the syllabus, in the section titled “Welcome to Educational Psychology!” (see page 151). The image of children can evoke excitement as students think about themselves as future educators. Visual tools such as white space, bold lettering, underlining, and a border around text may also be used to make the document more user friendly and engaging. Because many professors are e-mailing or posting the syllabus prior to the start of classes, students are often forming their first impressions of the course based on this document rather than on their interactions with their professors. Although, to our knowledge, there isn’t any research on the impact of sending a syllabus out to students prior to the start of class, research on first impressions has shown the importance of the first few interactions with a student (Clayson, 2013; Legg & Wilson, 2009). This was also illustrated in an interesting study conducted by Laws and colleagues (2010). In this study, students were randomly assigned to share their impressions of faculty at the end of the first class or at the end of the first week using an assessment instrument. All students then completed this assessment again at the end of the semester. Results indicated that “enduring first impressions are formed by the end of the first day of class” (Laws et al., 2010, p. 88). Students who participated in this study indicated that the course expectations were clearly communicated on the first day of class. Thus, maximizing the use of the syllabus as a motivational tool can foster high levels of engagement and motivation right from the start of the semester.

Research has found that students’ attitudes and actions are often connected to their impression of their professor (Myers & Huebner,

2011; Pass & Neu, 2014). In other words, students are more likely to be motivated to learn and to exert higher levels of effort in a class with a professor whom they view positively. Fornaciari and Dean (2014) found that students appreciate the effort that faculty put into creating a syllabus, so this will likely result in a more positive impression. Through the syllabus, professors can convey their passion for the subject matter and enthusiasm for the course (Habaneck, 2005). Positive faculty messages can be contagious, with students also getting excited about the course and ultimately engaging in actions that will be more likely to lead to successful outcomes.

Another way to use the syllabus as a motivational tool is to show your belief in your students and their ability to achieve success. We can communicate this message via a combination of challenging assignments, supportive statements, and emphasis on the availability of support. In the sample syllabus in the “Teaching Philosophy” section on page 153 in the Appendix, an example of this type of message is provided. Specifically, the last part of the first paragraph states, “You will be both challenged and supported throughout this learning experience.” These high-level beliefs can translate into high levels of academic achievement. In a classic study conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), it was found that teachers’ expectations of students influenced the actual achievement of students. Students with teachers who believed in them outperformed students with teachers who did not believe in their ability to be successful. Explicitly telling students you believe in them is therefore important.

Another way to use the syllabus as a motivational tool is to include choices in your syllabus. Choice increases student motivation (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Thus, having a syllabus with a menu of assignment options (i.e., paper, presentation, service-learning project) for students to choose from may also be worth considering as long as all of the options are directly aligned to the course learning outcomes.

MOVING FORWARD

Woods, Luke, and Weir (2010) stated, “Curriculum is what is taught and learned in schools,” whereas syllabi are a “bid to shape and set the parameters of a curriculum” (p. 362). Therefore, this book is meant to help you shape and set the parameters of your chosen curriculum. What will your students learn? How will they learn? How will they know *that* they have learned and *what* they have learned? In addition, think about how you motivate students about the curriculum. For instance, how can you get

students excited about the knowledge and skills they will gain as a result of the class? How will you engage students in the learning process?

It is hoped that as you read through this book and think about designing or redesigning your syllabus, you will be inspired to reflect on the design of your course in general, carefully considering what learning activities and support will lead to desired outcomes, and the design of your syllabus specifically. In “Applying Course Design Principles to the Syllabus” (chapter 2), the conversation on the syllabus is really an opportunity to look at your course as a whole, possibly making changes to the course structure and learning tasks in addition to repackaging course information into a syllabus that clearly maps out the learning path. Using Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) backward design framework, we’ll focus first on identifying and sharing the course learning outcomes. Next, we will explore what assignments or assessments will provide you and your students with strong evidence that the learning outcomes were achieved. The syllabus will be built based on the learning outcomes and assessments identified. Finally, we’ll discuss the importance of aligning teaching approaches to the outcomes and how students can learn about your teaching approach through the syllabus.

For those of you who want to give your syllabus a fresh new look but do not have the time at the moment to make significant changes to the overall design of the course, you will find chapters 3, 4, and 5 to be most helpful. These chapters will also be helpful for those of you who are “all in” and are using a backward design process to revise your syllabus. In chapter 3, we’ll explore the essential components of a syllabus and why these components are so important. We hope to challenge you to think differently about the content within your syllabus. In chapter 4, we’ll ask you to ponder several questions about common policy practices. In chapter 5, we will turn our attention to design considerations, addressing issues such as the tone, organization, and length of the syllabus. You’ll discover research that illustrates how simple changes to your syllabus can be quite beneficial to your students.

Chapter 6 is focused on evaluating syllabi. In this chapter, you’ll find a syllabus checklist and a syllabus rubric. You may even want to start by reading this chapter and engaging in a self-assessment of your syllabus. This chapter can also be very helpful to teaching and learning center staff or administrators who review and evaluate syllabi on their campus.

Chapter 7 is focused on using the syllabus throughout the semester. Given the importance of this document, this chapter shares strategies that you can use at the beginning of the semester to help students learn how to best use this document as a resource. For example, using icebreaker

activities designed around the syllabus not only connects students to one another but also helps students better understand the expectations for the course. Going beyond the initial activities, this section calls for professors to engage students with the syllabus throughout the semester. For instance, using a classroom engagement strategy, such as Turn and Talk, to discuss an upcoming assignment is a way to use the syllabus as a resource and to prepare for upcoming tasks.

Finally, we applaud your openness to change. In this day and age, it is far too easy to just update a few dates on the syllabus and print it out or post it in the learning management system. You are endeavoring to significantly improve your approach to teaching, and the syllabus is a great place to start. Your students will undoubtedly be appreciative of these efforts and will benefit from the time and energy you put into this redesign process.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The syllabus is an incredibly valuable resource on which students rely. In addition to using this document to communicate essential information about the course, you can use the syllabus as a planning tool. Developing or revising the syllabus for your course is a perfect opportunity to focus on course design, mapping out a learning path for your students to meet with success. Finally, the syllabus can also be used to motivate and engage your students even before class begins. Share your passion and excitement for your discipline, inviting students to partake in a rewarding learning journey with you over the course of the semester.

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