THE SYLLABUS RE-IMAGINED: FROM PAPER TO WEBSITE

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“A one-page syllabus? Really?” our young colleagues ask in mild disbelief. The syllabi we veteran professors remember from our undergrad days often consisted of a single sheet of paper listing due dates for required readings and major assignments. As readers of this journal know, syllabi today typically include much more, running to 20 pages and sometimes even 40 pages (Singham, 2005; Jones, 2012). Some of the new elements in syllabi are required by institutions, such as statements about academic honesty or disability accommodations. Since these appear in every syllabi students see, it is reasonable to wonder how carefully students actually read the syllabus (Jones, 2012; Nilson, 2010; Singham, 2005). In an effort to increase the probability that students will focus on critical content and use the syllabus as the learning support it is intended to be, two senior faculty at a mid-sized private college in the Northeast decided to reformat their syllabi to present all of the traditional information in website form.

BACKGROUND

Contemporary syllabi are complex documents. Some of the complexity has developed in response to new institutional requirements and new expectations from accrediting agencies; for example, for accreditation purposes departments may require that syllabi indicate how assignments are aligned with course objectives, program goals, and professional standards. New elements also have been added by professors seeking to give students the tools they need to be successful, such as resources for completing assignments and guidance on managing the workload (Nilson, 2010). Doolittle and Siudzinski’s literature review (2010) identified 26 components routinely recommended for inclusion in syllabi, and when Wolf, Czekanski, and Dillon (2013) examined syllabi, they looked for 45 different elements.

It is no wonder that contemporary syllabi are multifaceted documents; they are expected to fill many roles. Fink’s (2012) review of the literature identified eight major purposes for the course syllabus:

- a communication mechanism;
- a planning tool for instructors;
- a course plan for students;
- a teaching or pedagogical tool (resource for student learning);
- an artifact for teacher evaluations/record keeping tool;
- a contract of policies and procedures to be followed;
- a socialization process for students to the academic environment;
- and a scholarship opportunity for instructors. (p. 2)

Wolf et al. (2013) emphasize that syllabi increasingly also serve as accountability tools, used as part of the accrediting process to document that curriculum standards are being upheld. Because syllabi “are often described as legal documents and a contract between the university and students” and “violating the syllabus represents a triggering agent of instructional dissent by students” (Wolf et al., 2013, p. 101) instructors are urged to include elements designed to prevent misunderstandings about course policies and procedures that might lead to student appeals of final grades (e.g., Doolittle and Siudzinski, 2010).

As syllabi make expectations more explicit, often by adding more directives, they can take on a tone that is legalistic and authoritarian (Singham, 2005). Because the syllabus is “a point of interaction between faculty and students in and out of class time (that) reinforces the faculty member’s intentions, roles,
attitudes, and strategies” such syllabi undoubtedly undermine faculty efforts to encourage students to
take an active role as learners and to assume responsibility for the direction of their education (Wolf et al., 2013, p. 102; O’Brien, Millis and Cohen, 2009; Robb, 2012).

Recognizing that syllabi can create a strong first impression, for better or for worse, faculty use a variety of creative approaches to syllabus construction (Rosales, 2011). Jones (2012) describes syllabi that are, in whole or in part, formatted as: an RSA-style animation, posted to youtube.com; a video game RPG manual; newsletters and booklets, often using templates in Microsoft Publisher and Apple Pages; a comic book; a fold-your-own quarto; and Prezis.

Because we wanted to provide our students with inviting syllabi that make it easy to find what they are looking for, we decided to reformat our syllabi as websites that could be accessed by mobile devices.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Our investigation was carried out in two courses. PSYC 301: Biopsychology, is a required four-credit course for students majoring in psychology; it is typically taken in the sophomore or junior year. EDUC 373: Principles of Instruction for Students with Special Needs, is a required three-credit course for students pursuing certification in elementary and special education; it too is typically taken in the sophomore or junior year. In the semester before the website syllabi were used, we gathered baseline data in two sections of PSYC 301, which enrolled a total of 41 students, and in two sections of EDUC 373, which enrolled a total of 30 students. In the semester in which the website syllabi were used, we gathered data in one section of PSYC 301, which enrolled 21 students, and in two sections of EDUC 373, which enrolled a total of 27 students.

The students in all sections were traditional age students whose college experiences required extensive use of technology. They registered for all of their courses online, downloaded course materials and submitted assignments through an online course management system, accessed library resources remotely, and managed payments for tuition and housing through online accounts. Their smartphones were seldom far from sight.

PROCEDURE

In the first semester of our investigation, we proceeded in our typical fashion: we used Microsoft Word to create our syllabi, making sure to include all of the elements required by our departments, then uploaded the resulting Word documents to the College’s course management system. We distributed paper copies of the syllabus at the first class meeting, asking students to review it carefully in preparation for the second class. At the second class meeting, we administered a syllabus quiz to assess how much students had retained from their review of the paper syllabus (see Appendices A and B). Two quizzes were developed, with 15 (Biopsychology) or 16 (Principles of Instruction) multiple choice and short answer items that focused on the points of policy and procedure that each instructor regarded as most important. Students completed the quizzes independently and anonymously; after collecting them, we reviewed the items with the class.

For the second semester of the investigation, we reformatted our syllabi as websites. We chose Wix as our platform, because it offered an attractive visual interface and was easy to learn to use. The website syllabi included all of the information that we had always presented in the paper syllabi; the differences were in organization and appearance. We made important information easier to find: descriptions of major assignments that had spilled across five pages in one of the paper syllabi could now be found under a single tab on the home page, and information that we suspected students had seen many times before
and were likely to skip over (e.g., those complex tables linking course objectives, program goals, professional standards, etc.) was also clustered together under one tab. The most dramatic differences were in appearance. Using the templates provided by Wix with very few changes, we created visually engaging websites, full of color and movement. We added photographs and textual interest to draw students into the sections we wanted them explore in depth. The resulting website for Fall 2013 PSYC 301: Biopsychology can be found at http://loricrispi.wix.com/biopsychology and for Fall 2013 EDUC 373: Principles of Instruction at http://janstivers.wix.com/educ-373-fall-2013. We posted links to the new website syllabi in the space on the course management site where syllabi typically are found, and during the first class of the semester we showed students how to locate and use them. As we had done in the previous semester, we asked students to review the syllabus carefully in preparation for the following class. At the second class we administered the same 15- or 16- item quizzes we had used the previous semester, again independently and anonymously. At the end of the semester we also administered a four-item survey that asked students how they had used the syllabus and how useful they found it compared to a traditional paper syllabus (see Appendix C).

**Results**

Independent samples t-tests utilizing two-tailed analysis were conducted to compare the paper syllabus quiz scores to the web-based syllabus quiz scores for each of the two courses (See Table 1). Results indicated that there was not a significant difference in the Biopsychology classes in quiz scores for paper (M=9.29, SD=2.23) and web-based (M=8.95, SD=1.82) conditions; t(59)=-0.60, p =0.55. Nor was there a significant difference in the Principles of Instruction classes in quiz scores for paper (M=10.80, SD=2.40) and web-based (M=11.48, SD=1.85) conditions; t(55)=-1.19, p = 0.24.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Delivery Method</th>
<th>N</th>
<th># of Questions</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biopsychology</td>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Web</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>-0.60</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>1.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principles of Instruction</td>
<td>Paper</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>2.40</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>11.48</td>
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On the end of semester survey in the Biopsychology course, students in the web-based group and the paper syllabus group were consistent in that they both indicated that they used the syllabus occasionally, mostly for course policies and due dates, and slightly less so for reading assignments, that the syllabus was somewhat important, and it was about as useful as in other courses. In the Principles of Instruction course, end of semester data was available for the web-based syllabus but not the paper one. Students in this course used the syllabus frequently, mainly for due dates and reading assignments,
and somewhat less for course requirements and policies, the syllabus was substantially important to their success, with slightly fewer stating that it was essential, and it was about as useful as in other courses.

The results show that there were some commonalities in the two courses in that both classes used the syllabus at least occasionally and that it was at least as useful as in other courses regardless of the mode of delivery. However, students in the Principles of Instruction classes appeared to find the syllabus more important to their success and useful in more ways than did students in the Biopsychology classes. It is likely that this difference stems from the differing ways we as instructors used our institution’s course management system (e.g., Blackboard). In the Biopsychology course, it was customary for most of the syllabus content to also be posted in the readily visible “Announcements” section of the course management system, whereas in the Principles of Instruction course this information was presented primarily in the syllabus itself. Many students in Biopsychology who reported not depending on the syllabus said the reason they did not was that the information (for example, about assignments and due dates) was also made available in the announcements.
**Discussion**

We hypothesized that a website syllabus, one designed to draw attention to the information instructors deem most important, would lead students to grasp and retain information more effectively than a traditional paper syllabus. However, student scores on the syllabus quiz did not vary significantly whether the syllabus was a website or a paper document. From our review of student comments and our informal discussions with students in the intervening semesters, we conclude that students really care more about having access to useful content than about how the content is delivered.

Because students can get meaningful information from the syllabus regardless of format, faculty can confidently choose to offer a syllabus in a format they think is best suited to the course content and to student (and faculty) characteristics. For example, a syllabus formatted as an assemble-it-yourself quarto might be a wonderful introduction to a history of literature class, and one that looks like a comic book can set the stage for a dynamic course in the graphic memoir. Instructors should feel free to explore different ways of designing a syllabus, which may help them to think about the goals of the syllabus in a new light.

Like people everywhere, students sometimes prefer what they know and have successfully used in the past. A few students reported that they had habitual ways of using the syllabus, for example crossing off reading assignments week by week, that they missed when using the website syllabus. It may also be that students are more comfortable when they see a familiar format and know they can find information in the places where they have come to expect it. During the semester in which we used the website syllabi, a few students printed out the schedule portion of the website syllabus or asked for a paper equivalent. As increasing numbers of students transition from traditional books to using Kindles and other e-readers, this preference for paper is likely to decrease.

Faculty using alternately formatted syllabi need to be mindful of institutional requirements. Since syllabi within a department may share key features to promote ease of access, those should continue to be built into syllabi presented in different formats. As technology comes to permeate higher education, we hope it will be second nature for departments to accept URLs, screen captures, or other documentation in place of the paper syllabi instructors typically are required to submit. But in the short term, faculty using alternate formats must consider how to meet institutional requirements for syllabus submission.

Although our students did not express a clear preference for one format over the other, we like the idea of the website syllabus for a number of reasons. It can be a dynamic document that is easy to update both within the semester (for example, adding new resources for completing assignments) and from one semester to the next. In addition, a website syllabus allows the instructor to use announcements that draw students’ attention to important points and provide “just in time” delivery of materials, such as details about major assignments that might be overwhelming (or readily forgotten) if presented in a paper syllabus on the first day of classes. Finally, the website syllabus provides the instructor with the opportunity to use imagery, color, and movement to highlight the most important materials.

An unanticipated outcome of this study was that it helped us to think differently about how we use our campus’s course management system. We now look for ways to integrate the advantages of the website syllabus into our course management sites. We also try to apply principles of good website design, such as making important information accessible via a single click, rather than “hidden” within a number of nested folders. We encourage faculty members to re-imagine their syllabi and to explore alternate formats as part of their efforts to enhance student learning.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Syllabus Quiz

PSYC301L, Sections 111 and 116
BIOPSYCHOLOGY
Spring 2013
Instructor: Lori Crispi, Ph.D.

1. The course is __________________________
   a. An overview of the biological and medical components of the central nervous system
   b. An introduction to the effects of the nervous system on human behavior
   c. A theory based course that focuses on how Darwin contributed to the field of neuroscience
   d. A comprehensive study of brain-based neuroscience of human development

2. The course includes an emphasis on which topics?
   a. Vision, hearing, sleep, and the effect of drugs on the brain
   b. Historical developments in the field of biopsychology over the last 200 years
   c. The biological basis for birth defects and developmental disabilities
   d. Controversial topics in the field of biopsychology such as the Evolution vs. Creationism debate

3. What is the main purpose of the forum post assignments?

4. What will be the most common activity of each Lab period?

5. Where will you find the Lab assignments in the course shell online?

6. How will you submit the Lab assignments?

7. How many tests are given in the course?

8. Is there a cumulative final exam covering all the chapters?

9. What is the preferred way to contact the instructor?

10. A student who has “Excellent attendance and good participation or good attendance and excellent participation” can expect to get what grade for the Class Participation/Attendance portion of the final grade?

11. How many times are you expected to post on a forum question?

12. Each lab counts for what percent of your final grade?
13. What is the instructor’s expectation with regards to class participation?
   a. It is understandably a difficult course, so the instructor is flexible with regards to participation
   b. The instructor will be teaching in a lecture format, so there is not a lot of time for participation
   c. Contributions to class discussions are expected.

14. What is a student expected to do if he or she is unable to attend a class?

15. Under what circumstance can a student expect his or her final grade to be lowered by one full grade?
APPENDIX B

Syllabus Quiz

EDUC 373, PRINCIPLES OF INSTRUCTION
Fall 2013; Instructor: Jan Stivers

1. The instructional strategies you will learn in this course are
   a. Useful for all children but essential for students with disabilities
   b. Designed for children with autism spectrum disorders
   c. Drawn from research on children with visual and hearing impairments
   d. Based more on wisdom of practice rather than research evidence

2. The course includes an emphasis on strategies for teaching children
   a. In special education schools
   b. In self-contained classes
   c. In resource room settings
   d. In inclusive, co-taught classes

3. What is the purpose of “reflective practice”?

4. Most weeks you’ll have two kinds of reading assignments; what are they?

5. Where do you find the assigned readings?

6. What should you try to do if you must miss class?

7. What must you do if you miss more than two classes?

8. Name one book you might consider for the Professional Reading for Pleasure Project.

9. The micro-teaching project has two halves. One is the lesson you teach to your peers, which is recorded on a DVD. What is the second, equally important half?

10. Name one “choice project” (aka “term project”) that you are considering.

11. Which projects can be done in pairs?

12. How do you turn in your work for grading?

13. If you earn a low score on a project you can
   a. Revise and resubmit it for a maximum score of 90%
   b. Designate it as the one grade to be dropped from calculation of the final grade
   c. Replace it with a make-up assignment
   d. Ask the instructor for an extra credit assignment to raise your final grade
14. The classroom assessments are
   a. Typically not graded
   b. Used to monitor student learning
   c. Used to monitor teacher effectiveness
   d. All of the above

15. What portion of your final grade is determined by your class participation?
   a. 0
   b. 5
   c. 10
   d. 20

16. What portion of your final grade is determined by the final exam?
   a. 10
   b. 20
   c. 25
   d. 33.3
APPENDIX C

End of Semester Survey

Instructor’s Note: I would appreciate your voluntary participation in this anonymous survey. It is designed to help me improve the syllabus.

1. I used the syllabus
   - Only at the beginning of the course
   - Occasionally
   - Frequently

   Comments:

2. I used the syllabus to find information about (check all that apply)
   - Course goals and organization
   - Course policies (e.g., attendance, late papers)
   - Descriptions of course requirements
   - Due dates
   - Reading assignments
   - Other: Please specify

   Other: Please specify

3. How important was the syllabus to your success in the course:
   - Minimal
   - Somewhat
   - Substantial
   - Essential

   Comments:

4. How useful was this syllabus compared to the syllabi you used in other courses this semester?
   - Much less useful
   - Somewhat less useful
   - About the same
   - Somewhat more useful
   - Much more useful

   Comments: