

Relative to Teaching...

University of Arkansas

November 2004

SYLLABUS EMBELLISHMENT: ...MAKING YOURS EVEN BETTER! (a.k.a. SYLLABUS REDIVIVUS)

A syllabus can be a dynamic teaching and learning tool — not just a calendar or timetable.

Every faculty member who has ever constructed a syllabus has an individual set of criteria or goals for what the syllabus should accomplish. In some instances it may serve as a brief road map from the beginning of the semester to the end. Some professors may lay out reading assignments in great detail, specify deadlines, establish grading scales, explain policies, and offer encouragement. The point is that a syllabus is a document that is custom fitted to each instructor's needs. In this month's newsletter, we offer some syllabus thoughts that might not have occurred to you before. Feel free to use any of these pointers to embellish your own syllabus.

Judith Grunert O'Brien briefly mentions web-based syllabi. The University of Arkansas encourages ALL our faculty members to make their syllabi available on line, so that students (and their parents!) can have access to them at all times. You can include links to many resources that will help your students learn and which will help you to teach. If you don't know how to put your syllabus on a web page, find out! Check with your colleagues, call computing services, ask your students; get the word. It's not that complicated, and having your syllabus on line can save you and your students time, energy, and paper!

These observations originally appeared in *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach* by Judith Grunert O'Brien (Anker Publishing, 1997) and were recently featured in a posting on "Tomorrow's Professor," an e-mail listserv from Stanford University. She is on the staff of the Center for Support of Teaching and Learning at Syracuse University: jgrunert@syr.edu. Used with permission.

Your syllabus can serve a wide variety of functions that will support and challenge students as they engage in their educational activities.

1) Establishes Early Connection Between Student and Instructor

Research has shown that students want more frequent interaction with faculty. You can begin to communicate your availability by including basic information such as your name, address, telephone numbers, e-mail address, office hours, and how to arrange for a conference. You can also include a page soliciting biographical information (also address, phone #, e-mail, etc.) that will help you to learn students' names, their interests, and why they are in the course. To encourage interaction with other students in the course, you might use this information to develop a student roster that is

particularly useful for group work and work time out of class. You can include similar information about other important student contacts, such as TAs, technicians, main office staff, and librarians, when appropriate. This contact information will be useful in case plans change during the course of the term or semester.

2) Helps Set the Course Tone

Your syllabus communicates much about your attitudes toward students and learning. The way in which you communicate your views helps students to understand whether your class will be conducted in a formal or informal manner. Communicating an openness to questions, concerns, and dialogue begins with the syllabus. [UA note: humor can help]

Continued on next page

Continued from page 1

3) Describes Beliefs About Educational Purposes

You can explain whether your course has a product or a process orientation and how that determines your expectations of students. Explain how you have set your agenda for the course, how the course structure reinforces goals and objectives, how the activities and assignments will help them to meet both product and process goals. You may describe learning strategies and techniques you will use and your rationale for using them. You can make explicit how your criteria and standards for both their work process and products are aligned with course goals.

4) Acquaints Students with Course Logistics

Courses vary in terms of the days classes meet, the instructors for each class, and the type of sessions which occur (i.e., guest lecturer, teamwork sessions, simulations, films, etc.). Your syllabus can detail this information so that students will know what to expect and can be prepared for each class meeting. Providing students with a course calendar helps them to plan their work. Noting holidays and any days on which class will be canceled or rescheduled allows students to plan ahead and prevent misunderstandings. It also shows that you respect the value of students' time.

5) Contains Collected Handouts

Faculty often distribute handouts as they become appropriate to the topics covered. Often students put them into whatever notebook is at hand and then find it difficult to retrieve them. By planning your course, preparing the necessary handouts, and including them in your syllabus, you help students, among other things, to keep all course material together and accessible. These items, among other things, might include biographical information forms, detailed information on assignments, various evaluation forms, or diagrams and other visual representations.

6) Defines Student Responsibilities for Success

Your syllabus can help students to achieve some personal control over their learning, to plan their semester, and to manage their time effectively. If your students have a clear idea of what they are

expected to accomplish, when, and even why, they will be more likely to finish assignments within a reasonable time and be appropriately prepared for classes and exams.

7) Describes Active Learning

Students often conceive of learning as the acquisition of correct information, but they may not know what it means to take an active role in the process, beyond rote memorization and recall. You can include a description of your expectations for student initiative in your syllabus. If critical thinking, problem solving, and inquiry are part of your course, it is helpful to tell students that they will be asked to consider multiple viewpoints and conflicting values and to imagine, analyze, and evaluate alternate positions on issues or solutions to problems.

It is also important to describe what students can expect from you in your role as teacher: content expert, formal authority, socializing agent, facilitator, role model, experienced learner, resource consultant, coach, counselor.

8) Helps Students Assess Readiness

What are the prerequisites for your course? In addition to specific course prerequisites, students should be given some idea about what they should already know and what skills they should already have before taking your course so they can realistically assess their readiness. Your syllabus can provide information about the challenges students will face, the assumed skill level, the skills they will build upon, and the skills they will learn during your course. You may also include information about institutional or other sources for academic support. Some faculty include self-assessment tools and learning contracts to assist students with this process.

9) Sets a Broader Context for Learning

Your syllabus can provide a perspective that allows students to see instructors in your discipline as active and experienced learners engaged in inquiry in their professional fields or disciplines. Many students are unaware that their instructors are involved in research and creative

professional activity beyond the classroom, that they are not simply transmitters of knowledge and skills.

Your syllabus can provide information that shows students how your course fits within the discipline or profession, the general program of study, and their own educational plans. You can make students aware that every discipline or field has its unique way of knowing. You can encourage students to approach the field actively as ethnographic fieldworkers who want to understand the social and intellectual practices of the field. Assure them that you will guide them while they learn how to use the characteristic tools and modes of inquiry, patterns of explanation, discourse practices, and the types of artifacts that are valued and produced in their field.

10) Provides a Conceptual Framework

Your syllabus can support major ideas, topics, and factual information. Include in it questions or issues for students to think about that range from major issues or key questions in the discipline to the meaning of a significant passage in a course reading. Such a framework will help students organize information and focus their learning.

11) Describes Available Learning Resources

You can list campus resources such as libraries, reserve desks, reading rooms, laboratories, computer clusters, and studios that students may use (including their locations, availability, and policies) as well as any information concerning the location and use of aids such as tape recordings, copy services, CD ROMs or videos. You may also note the locations of specific books, videos, and sites on computer networks.

12) Communicates Role of Technology

Computers and computer networks have increased our ability to access information and communicate with each other. Computers are working tools that students use for their own learning: to enhance their thinking; plan and revise learning goals; monitor and reflect on their progress; set up and access their own personal knowledge files; share a common database; build their own database; use a spreadsheet; run statistical software; keep a journal; write, illustrate, and revise texts; and

build up a portfolio. You can use computers as a resource tool to provide direct instruction of new content, tutorials, and interactive simulations; to model extremely small or large phenomena.

Studies have shown that students derive much benefit from environments which encourage collaborative/cooperative learning. The Web with platforms such as WebCT and Blackboard allows threaded discussions for each class and provides opportunities for asynchronous collaboration (participants can share work that may be done at different times and places). Networked writing environments encourage students to write more and to learn from each other. On-line discussion groups can lead to fuller participation in class discussions by students who may not participate in face-to-face classroom environments.

13) Can Provide Difficult-to-Obtain Reading Materials

There are times when courses are developed before comprehensive literature is available on the topic. The syllabus can include copies of articles you want your students to read, as well as supplemental information not found in course texts. You can include materials that expand on, synthesize, and facilitate critical reflection on issues presented during formal instruction. You might include materials that fill in the gaps not covered by class presentations, or present questions raised by other points of view. When you use the syllabus in this way, be certain that you obtain necessary copyright clearances for reading selections.

14) Can Improve Effectiveness of Student Note Taking

Good, carefully written notes are a significant resource for active learning. Active thinkers keep notebooks and journals of ideas from readings, lectures, presentations, and their own ruminations about topics. It is important to make every effort to help students improve the quality of this form of writing. As a model, you may want to include outlines that provide an orientation to topics for lectures and presentations, making it clear what you want students to remember, and providing

room for their own interpretations and elaborations of the material. You can use notetaking pairs intermittently during or at the end of a lecture. (In this case, two students work together to review major concepts and pertinent information, to clarify unresolved issues or concerns.) It is also helpful to include any detailed formulas and diagrams that students will be required to use. You may want to include study techniques that are specific to your course. In this way, the contents of the syllabus will help to organize and focus student notetaking and learning.

15) Can Include Material Supporting Learning Outside the Classroom

Much learning takes place outside of the classroom. You can transform student study time outside of class by providing strategies in your syllabus that help students to interact more critically with the textbook, supplemental readings, or other work, so that they will be better prepared for class. For example, along with the readings you might give students a short (one page or less) writing assignment that asks them to support, reject, or modify the thesis or claims in the reading. You might include a guide for troubleshooting a story or a drawing. You can also

provide self-check assignments that allow students to monitor their progress.

16) Can Serve as a Learning Contract

As an agreement or contract defining mutual obligations between instructor and students, your syllabus also speaks for the college and university. This gives you responsibilities but also gives you protection against complaints or challenges to your teaching. This also supports your decisions on grades, teaching methods, readings, and topics of inquiry. You will have a record of what you promised and planned. You will need to be familiar with institutional policies regarding attendance, examinations, drop/adds, course withdrawals, learning disabilities, and academic integrity.

We recommend that you put your syllabus on line, then send the URL to your students BEFORE the semester begins. You'll be delighted to see how much better prepared your students will be when they come to class!

Wally Cordes Teaching and Faculty Support Center
University of Arkansas
NWQ D-108
Fayetteville, AR 72701

<http://www.uark.edu/misc/tfscinfo/tfsc@uark.edu> or 575-3222

