

Developing an Effective Course Syllabus

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Abstract

Throughout the 10-year span of a longitudinal research study in colleges of agriculture, professors were asked to share their course syllabi with the research team. It became an increasing concern across the decade that professors lacked definition, clarity, and uniformity in developing syllabi for their courses. In fact, the extremes ranged from an eloquently detailed 12-page document to no syllabus at all.

Recently, in preparation for The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Evaluation (NCATE) formal review, a department chose to thoroughly examine, edit, and re-align all course syllabi with the current standards, and with each course in the department, to create a seamless articulation across levels and a uniform look across the department. This article highlights and offers examples of the standard components of an effective syllabus, so that professors across all disciplines have a guide for constructing course syllabi.

Introduction

It is important and fundamental that educators provide a framework for the course they will be teaching. Most often that framework is provided to the students through a course syllabus. For students, the syllabus provides security in knowing the direction and expectations for a particular course (McKeachie, 1978; 1999). There may be as well additional means by which instructors communicate information and convey expectations to students; however, the syllabus provides a written form of communication that lists responsibilities and sets goals for the course (Eberly, Newton, & Wiggins, 2001). "The syllabus is often the initial communication tool that students receive and is often the most formal mechanism for sharing information with students regarding the course" (Eberly, Newton, Wiggins, 2001, p.56).

"Despite the importance of a syllabus, the structures and formats of written syllabi tend to be handed down from one generation to the next, rarely considered as part of curriculum redesign" (Eberly, Newton, Wiggins, 2001, p.56). Eberly et. al (2001) further concluded that, "Nothing substantial drives

syllabus construction. With the whirlwind of responsibilities surrounding the initiation of new faculty and development of new courses, syllabus construction becomes a minor task" (Eberly, Newton, Wiggins, 2001, p.71).

Given that a well-developed syllabus provides a sound framework for the course being taught, as well as security and direction for students, what steps can be followed in creating an effective syllabus? The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Evaluation (NCATE) outlines a sound structure to follow when developing a course syllabus. Using NCATE criterion, the Department of Human and Community Resource Development (HCRD) at The Ohio State University is striving to meet the needs of students in the classroom by developing a uniform department-wide framework for all course syllabi. This article provides a thorough examination, and examples, of the elements contained in the HCRD syllabi, which can be used by professors in any discipline across colleges of agriculture to strengthen the effectiveness of their course syllabi.

Review of Literature:

Bers, et al. (1996), suggest that the integrity of a syllabus is important for administrative purposes because (1) syllabi are explicit public descriptions of courses, (2) they can and often are used as evidence in grievance and judicial hearings, and (3) they are used routinely to determine course equivalency in transfer situations. Because syllabi serve these functions, they form a contract between the student and the university.

According to McKeachie, the syllabus is organizational and centered around a schedule of assignments, tests, and topics (McKeachie, 1999). McKeachie also views the syllabus as a contract. He recommends that professors listen to student input and consider alternative ways in which students can achieve class goals. His assertion is that "students who have options and a sense of personal control are likely to be more highly motivated for learning" (McKeachie, 1999, p. 17). In addition, McKeachie (1978) contends that while instructors are developing the syllabus, they are forced to carefully consider the topics to be covered, the dates that assignments will

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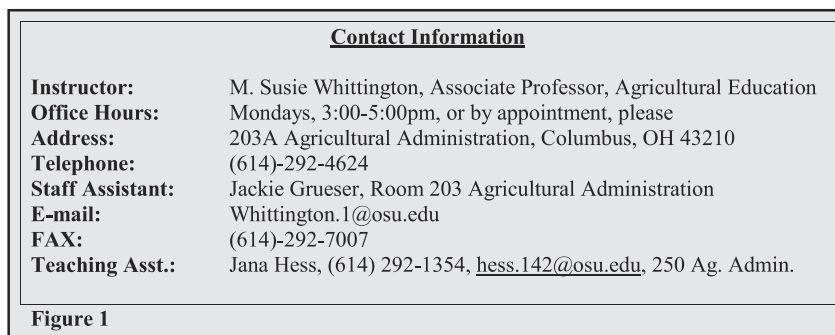
be due, the dates that exams will be administered, and especially the objectives that will be reached (McKeachie, 1978).

When purposefully selecting the objectives that will be reached, the professor is focusing on learning rather than teaching, which requires a shift from an overview of what the instructor will teach, to consideration of what students need in order to be successful learners. The syllabus then is the first opportunity to introduce the learner-centered paradigm to students and to describe for them the roles and responsibilities that both professors and students share in the class (Diamond, 1997, p. ix). Allowing students to review the course syllabus and then offering input into its content, enables them to take part in its development, and therefore take ownership in their learning. Instructors must take advantage of this opportunity for student-centered learning.

Syllabus Construction

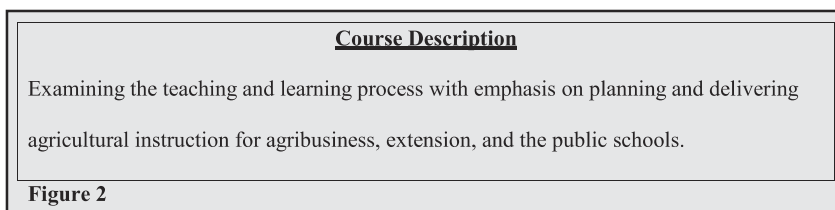
Contact Information

The front page of the syllabus contains contact information so that students can reach the professor or teaching assistant (TA) if they have questions regarding the course. The information listed should include, but is not limited to: the instructor's name, office address and telephone number, e-mail address, fax number, office hours, staff assistant contact information and teaching assistant contact information. An example of such contact information is shown in Figure 1:



Course Description

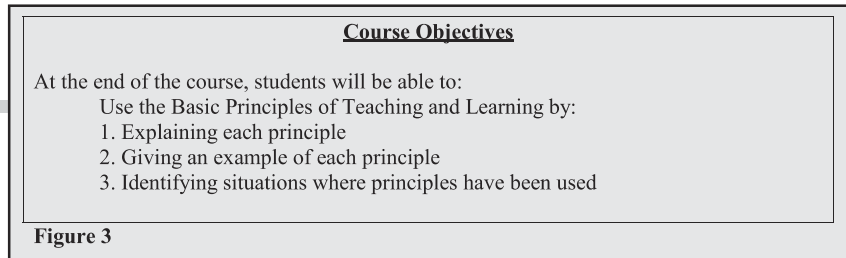
Provide the course description for students so that there is an immediate clear picture of the course



intent. Write a broad overview of the course that captures the nature of the course, but avoids specific details. Using active tense pulls the student into the present. Figure 2 shows an example of a course description.

Course Objectives

Incorporate the course objectives into the syllabus immediately following the course description so that students begin to get a sense of “belonging” because they see that the objectives will meet their needs in their program of study. Also, by placing detailed objectives in the syllabus, which is generally given to students on the first day of the course, students will be able to read the objectives, and immediately ask questions about the objectives for the course. An example of course objectives is shown in Figure 3:



Standard Statements Included in a Syllabus

Construction of the syllabus will include the following statements according to NCATE criterion:

1. Off-campus field experiences
2. Diversity Statement
3. Technology Statement
4. Academic Misconduct Statement
5. Statement of Students' Rights

Figures 4 through 8 provide examples of these statements (other institutions may have specific statements).

Course Outline

The course outline is the heart of the syllabus and requires much thought, sequencing, and refinement across time. The course outline should include, at a minimum, each class date, the topic that will be taught each day, and the reading assignment that must be completed before class to adequately prepare for the session. Figure 9 is an example of the course outline (where “T” = “Tuesday” class meeting, and “R” = “Thursday” class meeting).

By providing a course outline, students preview the topic for each class period. They can then be fully

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Off-Campus Field Experiences

All day each Friday and one weekend during the quarter, the pre-service teacher preparation curriculum will be enhanced by traveling in- and-out-of-the-state to further refine the learning outcomes desired for the students in this department. Students will meet the objectives of the field experiences by interacting with Ohio State University partners in non-traditional agriculture, and urban agriculture, and by teaching in diverse formal and non-formal educational settings.

Figure 4

Diversity Statement

- 1) Diversity enriches the educational experience by providing students with the opportunity to learn from individuals who differ from themselves.
- 2) Diversity promotes personal growth and a healthy society by challenging stereotyped preconceptions, encouraging critical thinking, and helping students learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds.
- 3) Diversity strengthens communities and the workplace by preparing students for citizenship in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society, and by fostering mutual respect and teamwork.
- 4) Diversity enhances the country's economic competitiveness by effectively developing and using the talents of all citizens (Diversity Action Plan, 2000).

Figure 5

Technology Statement

The instructor uses a listerv of students enrolled in the course to communicate important information, send necessary planning templates, and to clarify and/or receive assignments. Students enrolled in the course will use videotapes and VCRs, CD ROMs, email, PowerPoint, laptop computers, and projection equipment to enhance their learning in the course.

Figure 6

Academic Misconduct Statement

Academic misconduct of any kind will not be tolerated or permitted. If students have questions about what activities constitute academic misconduct they should consult Faculty Rule 3335-23-04. The procedures that will be followed, should suspected academic misconduct occur, will follow Faculty Rule 3335-23-14. In all cases of suspected academic misconduct: "The instructor will make every effort to inform the student of the allegation" (Faculty Rule 3335-23-14, #3A).

All assignments and examinations must be completed by individual efforts. It is expected that you complete each assignment on your own merit unless otherwise stated. Furthermore, it is not recommended that you share your resources if it can be construed to be academic misconduct. (<http://oaa.ohio-state.edu/03hndbks.html>)

Figure 7

Statement Of Students' Rights

"Any student with a documented disability who may require special accommodations should self-identify to the instructor as early in the quarter as possible to receive effective and timely accommodations."

If you need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability, you should contact me to arrange an appointment as soon as possible. At the appointment we can discuss the course format, anticipate your needs and explore potential accommodations. I rely on the Office For Disability Services for assistance in verifying the need for accommodations and developing accommodation strategies. If you have not previously contacted the Office for Disability Services, I encourage you to do so.

Figure 8

prepared to engage in scholarly discussion throughout the course. Consider including a statement that says, "Topics and the order will change as needs dictate". Since there are times throughout the course that an instructor may need to re-teach or review a topic, which would dictate a change in the course outline, adding this statement to the syllabus permits minor changes to be made to meet students' needs (with their prior knowledge of the potential for change).

Course Requirements

Students enter a new course with an immediate need to know the course requirements. Course requirements (Figure 10) include the title of the assignments and the number of points each assignment is worth. Notice in the example the amount of detail that is provided to the student. The "Unit of Instruction" assignment, and the "Micro-teaching" assignment are broken out into phases and/or sections so that students see the complete requirement. Students also immediately see the percentages, and thus the weighted importance the professor has placed on each requirement.

Course Evaluation

The course evaluation includes a brief description of the specific criterion the professor will use to evaluate each assignment. Also, the course evaluation emphasizes the due date, and restates the possible points earned for that assignment. Add a statement that lets students know that there is a formal process in place for their use in inquiring about a grade. An example might be, "If you have a question about the points you received for a particular item, email Dr. Whittington and state the specific concern." An example of a course evaluation section is provided in Figure 11 (note that this is the course evaluation for item 1c, "Unit of Instruction" in the Course Requirements listed above).

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<u>Course Outline</u>		
<u>Class</u>	<u>*Topic</u>	<u>Reading Assignment</u>
T 4/30	Group teaching techniques (I)	Ch. 6
R 5/2	Principles of teaching and learning	Ch. 2

Figure 9

<u>Course Requirements</u>	
<u>Assignments</u>	<u>Points</u>
1. Teaching Assignments	
a. & b. Daily Teaching Plan 1&2	150
c. Unit of Instruction (complete and detailed)	200
Part 1 = 50	
Part 2 = 50	
Part 3 (complete) = 100	
2. Daily Reflections (18 class mtgs x10 pts. ea.)	180
3. Class Attendance and Participation	180
4. Final Exam	100
5. Microteaching	
a. Teaching (see lab syllabus)	625
b. Microteaching plans (5x100)	500
c. Microteaching self-critiques (6x6.7)	40
d. One-on-One video review	25
Total possible points	2000
Microteaching/Self-critique/Review = 34.5%	
Daily teaching plans/Microteaching plans/Unit = 42.5%	
Attendance/Participation/Reflections = 18%	
Final = 5%	

Figure 10

<u>Course Evaluation</u>		
ALL ASSIGNMENTS MUST BE TYPED!		
Spelling and grammar ALWAYS matter and are graded!		
<u>Component</u>	<u>Date Due</u>	<u>Points</u>
Assignment #1c		200
Part I -	May 9	50
Part II -	May 21	50
Complete -	June 6	100
<p>Assignment #1c will follow an outline for problem-solving teaching presented and discussed in class. It is designed as a <u>true-to-life</u> assignment that you will actually teach as part of one of your microteaching labs, AND that you will teach during student teaching. The assignment will be graded on thorough completion and timeliness. Specifically the unit of instruction will be graded on thoroughness of the "content" and "notes to self" (i.e. 1. Are there clearly written objectives with action measurable verbs and condition, criterion and performance? 2. Is there an interest approach that truly catches interest AND gives a "heads-up" as to where students are headed for the day? 3. Can it be taught in the time allotted?-- 4. Have ALL learners been given an opportunity to show that they have learned the material? 5. Is there a summary and a connection to where they are headed next?). You will include a 100-point final exam for the evaluation component of your Unit of Instruction. NOTE--Can a "substitute" teacher teach this plan exactly as you intended using only the materials and directions provided by the plan? Make sure all overheads/handouts are labeled to correspond with directions given in the plan.</p>		

Figure 11

Grading Scale

Students have the right to know how many points are needed to obtain a certain grade in the course. The grading scale, most often, is a university-wide standard grading scale (like the one below from OSU), or professors may be at liberty to develop their own scale. Figure 12 is an example of a standard grading scale adapted to points.

Textbook

The syllabus indicates the complete citation of the text that will be used for the course. If the book can be found on the World Wide Web at a reduced cost, share that information with students. Also, if there is more than one location in which students can purchase the text; indicate the location(s) that carry it (Figure 13).

Additional Readings

Other readings may be assigned throughout the course and therefore should be listed in the syllabus with full citations in case students want to locate them prior to the date that the topic is presented. An example of assigned readings is shown in Figure 14.

Conclusion

A syllabus becomes an integral part of a professor's course that encourages and supports the sort of interactivity and active, purposeful, effective learning that we want to promote (Diamond, 1997). Therefore, integrating the NCATE structure described throughout this article into a course syllabus will provide the framework and direction sought by professors and students, thus creating the contract that both parties desire, when the syllabus is provided to students and discussed with students on the first day of class.

Professors will want to analyze their course syllabi as "well-considered plans," in which they are willing to reinvent some of the structure according to the students and the situations they find in their

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classes (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). “Learning what students value in the syllabus will contribute to its usefulness as an instrument of education” (Eberly, Newton, Wiggins, 2001, p. 72).

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Wlodkowski, R. J., & Ginsberg, M. B. (1995). *Diversity and motivation: Culturally responsive teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<u>Grading Scale</u>					
	%	points		%	points
A	(100-94%)	= 2000-1880	C	(76-74%)	= 1539-1480
B+	(93-90%)	= 1879-1800	C-	(73-70%)	= 1479-1400
B	(86-84%)	= 1739-1680	D+	(69-67%)	= 1399-1340
B-	(83-80%)	= 1679-1600	D	(66-64%)	= 1339-1280
C+	(79-77%)	= 1599-1540	E	(63-0%)	= 1279 and below

Figure 12

Textbook

Newcomb, L.H., McCracken, J.D., & Warmbrod, J.R. (1993). *Methods of Teaching Agriculture*. Danville, IL: Interstate Printers and Publishers, Inc.

The textbook is available at Long’s Bookstore on High Street.

Figure 13

Readings as Assigned

Balschweid, M.M., Thompson, G.W. (2000). Integrating science into agriculture programs: implications for addressing state standards and teacher preparation programs. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 41(2), 73-80.

Rothenberger, B.H., & Steward, B.R. (1995). A greenhouse laboratory experience: Effects on student knowledge and attitude. *Journal of Agricultural Education* 36(1), 24-30.

Figure 14

