**Your Syllabus as a means for Positive Change in the Classroom**

ABSTRACT

Faculty generally distribute a syllabus at the start of classes. An effective course syllabus sets the tone for the class. While much time is spent in constructing syllabi, the resulting documents do not always reflect recent empirical work on the elements of an effective syllabus. The moderators of this session plan to conduct a 60-minute hands-on workshop for instructors who wish to fine-tune their syllabi so that they can be a *means of positive change* in their classrooms. The session is applicable to faculty who teach management at all levels: undergraduate, graduate and executive courses.

**Key words:** syllabus, positive change, management

**Your Syllabus as a means for Positive Change in the Classroom**

**Introduction**

Nearly all management faculty distribute a syllabus at the start of their courses. Some schools or departments even require one be given to students. Years ago, an instructor would hand out a one-page listing of chapters and exam/assignment dates and call it a day. In today’s environment, however, a syllabus plays multiple roles; they have evolved to a point where they are much more than a mere map of what is to be covered in a course. They have moved beyond the simple dictionary definition of “a summary outline of a discourse, treatise, or course of study or of examination requirements” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

An effective course syllabus sets the tone for the class: is it welcoming and inclusive, or is it cold and contractual? Does it pique students’ interest and motivate them to learn more? Does the syllabus communicate what will be expected of them and what they will need to do to attain the course objectives? An effective syllabus also outlines what the students can expect the instructor to do (and not do). On a practical level, is the syllabus as accessible as possible to students with visual and other challenges?

While many instructors spend a lot of time constructing their syllabi, the resulting documents do not always reflect recent empirical work on the elements of an effective syllabus. How many instructors make sure their syllabus is ADA compliant? Who checks to make sure their syllabus is warm, welcoming and inclusive of people from all backgrounds and walks of life? How many can say that **their** syllabus is a means of positive change in the management classroom?

The moderators of this session plan to conduct a 60-minute hands-on workshop for instructors who wish to fine-tune their syllabi so that they can be a **means of positive change** in their classrooms. This session is applicable to faculty who teach management at all levels: undergraduate, graduate and executive courses.

**Theoretical Foundation / Teaching Implications**

We will begin with a short overview of the research on the elements of an effective, inclusive syllabus—one that can be a means of positive change in the classroom. For example, does the syllabus focus on the instructor’s concerns and perspective or is it more learner-centered (Richmond, Mitchell, Morgan, Slattery, & Cooper, 2019)? Does the syllabus convey an inclusive tone that makes students feel like they are joining a community of learners (Collins, 1997) or is it cold and contractual in nature? Additional empirically-based elements of effective syllabi will also be reviewed.

Then we will briefly explain the scoring rubric (see Appendix A). This rubric was derived from empirical research on effective syllabi, recommendations from disability advocacy organizations (e.g., the British Dyslexia Association www.bdadyslexia.org.uk), and a syllabus rubric developed by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/index.php)

**Learning Objectives**

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

* Describe the elements of an effective and inclusive management course syllabus.
* Assess a syllabus to determine how to improve its use as a means for positive change in the classroom.

**Session Overview & Description**

Participants will be asked to bring a syllabus to the workshop. Initially, they will be asked to assess their own syllabus using the rubric (see below). Then the syllabus will be exchanged with another session attendee. The second faculty member will, in turn, use the rubric to score how well the syllabus meets the various elements of an inclusive and effectives syllabus.

Afterward, each pair will discuss their scoring. They will share observations about the syllabus’ strengths and make suggestions for improvements. The goal is for each participant to have a better understanding of how his or her syllabus can be a means for positive change in the classroom and what needs to be modified to get closer to that ideal.

**Tentative timeline**

This session would run for 60 minutes. The table below outlines the duration of each activity.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 0:00 – 0:10  (10 minutes) | Introduction and brief overview of the research on effective and inclusive syllabi. |
| 0:10 – 0:45  (35 minutes) | Syllabi assessment   * Have participants pair up. A moderator will participate in the event of an odd number of attendees. * Distribute two copies of the syllabus assessment rubric to each participant. * Allow time for the participants to review both their own and their partner’s syllabus. * Pair discussion of observations and suggestions.   (Note: sample syllabi will be available for those participants who do not have a syllabus or do not wish to share theirs.) |
| 0:45 – 0:60 (15 minutes) | Wrap-up: Whole group review of key take-aways:   * Empirically-based best practices. * Improving syllabus accessibility, inclusiveness and effectiveness. * Other? |

**Resources/References.**

<https://www.accessiblesyllabus.com/>

<https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/common/ckeditor/filemanager/userfiles/About_Us/policies/Dyslexia_Style_Guide.pdf>

Collins, T. (1997). For openers…An inclusive syllabus. In: *New paradigms for college teaching*, ed. W. E. Campbell and K. A. Smith, 79–102. Edina, MN: Interaction

Palmer, M. S., Bach, D. J., & Streifer, A. C. (2014). Measuring the promise: A learning‐focused syllabus rubric. To improve the academy: A journal of educational development, 33 (1), 14-36.

<https://cte.virginia.edu/sites/cte.virginia.edu/files/Syllabus-Rubric-Guide-2-13-17.pdf>

<https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-syllabus>

Richmond A.S., Mitchell, N. G., Morgan, R. K., Slattery, J. M. & Cooper, A.G. (2019). *Project Syllabus: An Exploratory Study of Learner-Centered Syllabi*. Teaching of Psychology, 46(1), 6-15.

http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/index.php

**APPENDIX A**

**Inclusive Syllabus Rubric \***

**Text Checklist** (adapted from the British Dyslexia Association style guide).

\_\_\_\_ Use plain, 12-14 point sans serif font (Helvetica, Arial, Verdana, Tahoma, Calibri, etc.).

\_\_\_\_ If possible, divide the page into two columns (so that each line has about 6-9 words).

\_\_\_\_ Use 1.5 line spacing.

\_\_\_\_ Break up text into smaller paragraphs of between 2-4 sentences.

\_\_\_\_ Use bold to emphasize text (not italics or underlining).

\_\_\_\_ Align text to the left.

\_\_\_\_ Avoid green and red/pink text (difficult for people who have color blindness).

\_\_\_\_ The syllabus should be available to the students as a Word document (which is screen readable and the user can adjust font size & color, line spacing, etc.)

**Category 1: Syllabus design**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Insufficient (0)** | **Effective (1)** | **Exemplary (2)** |
| **Organization** | Much of the syllabus seems to be under development, with only some key components of the course identified. | Syllabus is generally clear and well organized. Students can understand the key components and structure of the course. | Syllabus is clear and well organized, including providing a “big picture” overview. Students can clearly understand all components and structure of the course. |
| **Aesthetic appearance** | Design does not communicate course information clearly | Design communicates some course information clearly. | Design communicates course information clearly throughout the document. |
| **Course rationale** | Rationale for the course and its design are not mentioned. | Rationale for the course and its design are mentioned, but aspects are missing or ill-defined. | Rationale for the course and its design are clearly stated |
| **Course goals** | Course goals are not clearly defined and do not align to learning objectives | Course goals are included but may not align to learning objectives or are ill-defined. | Course goals are clearly defined and are closely aligned to learning objectives. |
| **Learning objectives** | Learning objectives are vague, incomplete, or are not measurable. | Learning objectives are identified but are not consistently measurable. | Learning objectives are identified and consistently written in a measurable manner. |
| **Class time allocation aligns with learning objectives** | The allocation of class time and weight of assignments is disconnected from the course learning objectives. | The allocation of class time and weight of assignments somewhat parallels the course learning objectives. | The allocation of class time and weight of assignments clearly parallels the course learning objectives. |

**Category 2: Syllabus tone**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Insufficient (0)** | **Effective (1)** | **Exemplary (2)** |
| **Language** | Authoritarian or negative language. | Impersonal or “contractual” language. | Warm, welcoming and positive language. |
| **Attitude conveyed** | Confrontational or punitive attitude. | Neutral or cold attitude. | Approachable or empathetic attitude. |
| **Student compliance** | Coerced | Commanded | Invited |
| **Classroom culture** | Authoritarian-based | Rules-based | Community-based |
| **Style** | Complicated, verbose language. Long sentences and paragraphs. | Moderately complicated language. Moderate sentences & paragraphs. | Clear, concise language. Short sentences & paragraphs. |
| **Voice** | Passive voice. | Mix of passive and active voice. | Active voice. |
| **Diverse images & examples used** (different genders, races, cultures, socio-economic statuses, faith traditions, etc.) | No diversity. | Some diversity. | Wide diversity. |
| **Focus** | Topic, content or faculty member focused. | Some elements of learner focus evident. | Learner focused. |

**Category 3: Teaching Methods**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Insufficient (0)** | **Effective (1)** | **Exemplary (2)** |
| **Pedagogy** | Learning experiences are minimally consistent with best practice pedagogy in teaching the subject matter. | Learning experiences are somewhat consistent with best practice pedagogy for the subject matter. | Learning assignments are consistent with best practice pedagogy (e.g. active learning, problem-based learning, etc. as appropriate for the course). Innovative techniques are used. |
| **Student engagement** | Students take a passive role in the learning process. | Moderate student engagement in the learning process. | Students are engaged in the learning process in a variety of ways. |
| **Accessibility-Universal Design for Learning** | Information about resources for students with disabilities not provided. | Some accessibility/UDL issues are briefly addressed. | Accessibility/UDL issues are explicitly and fully addressed. |
| **Student roles and expectations** | Unclear about what is expected of students either inside or outside the classroom. | Somewhat identifies what is expected of students inside or outside the classroom. | Clearly identifies what is expected of students OR a process for the determination of such expectations is clearly defined |
| **Faculty roles and responsibilities** | Faculty roles and responsibilities are not defined. | Faculty roles and responsibilities are somewhat defined. | Faculty roles and responsibilities are clearly defined (e.g., timeliness of responses to e-mails, when graded assignments will be returned, etc.) |
| **Interaction and communication** | Students are not provided an opportunity to communicate with one another outside of the classroom. The only method provided for communicating with the instructor is office hours. | Students have tools to communicate with one another and the instructor outside of class. Communication tools may be limited, poorly explained, or not tied to student learning. | Students are provided tools to communicate with one another and the instructor outside of class and these tools are well integrated into the course to facilitate student learning. |

**Category 5: Assessment**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Insufficient (0)** | **Effective (1)** | **Exemplary (2)** |
| **Student evaluation** | Guidelines for evaluation of student assignments and grade determination is unclear. | Guidelines for evaluation of student assignments and grade determination are somewhat clear. | Guidelines for evaluation of student assignments and process of grade determination are clear. |
| **Formative student performance feedback** | No opportunities for formative feedback. | Some opportunities for formative feedback. | Students receive regular formative feedback about their performance throughout the course. |
| **Multiple forms of assessment** | Limited opportunities for students to demonstrate achievement of the learning objectives. | Some learning objectives are assessed through multiple forms of assessment. | Learning objectives are assessed through two or more forms of assessment |
| **Alignment of learning objectives and assessment** | Learning objectives are not aligned with course and assessment activities | Learning objectives are somewhat aligned with course and assessment activities, or alignment is present but not explicitly stated. | Learning objectives are closely aligned with course and assessment activities. This alignment is explicitly stated |
| **Assessment strategies** | Minimal or no assessment strategies are used to measure content knowledge, attitudes and/or skills. | Some ongoing strategies are used to measure content knowledge, attitudes and/or skills. | Ongoing multiple assessment strategies are used to measure content knowledge, attitudes and/or skills |