Accessible Syllabus Design – Converting your Syllabus to Improve Learning

Abstract: For individual faculty members, the course syllabus – the most basic teaching document and the first course document students see – is an ideal place to invoke the framework of inclusiveness and demonstrate awareness of diversity. This workshop will focus on accessible syllabus design as a technique faculty can use from Day 1 to signal and promote inclusion in their classrooms. Theoretical foundations include universal design for learning, disability studies and diversity frameworks. Before and after examples will be shared, bring a copy of your own course syllabus for an activity.

Keywords: Inclusive teaching, disability, accessibility

Introduction

Universities are making efforts to recognize the diversity of their students, and to promote inclusion. For individual faculty members, the course syllabus – the most basic teaching document – is an ideal place to invoke the framework of inclusiveness and demonstrate awareness of diversity. As the first course document students often see, the syllabus can set the expectations for the learning environment, learning outcomes, assessment, and requirements. Course syllabi reveal a lot about teachers' underlying philosophies of teaching and learning, and for their expectations for the relationship between teacher and students. Regular review and self-assessment of one's course syllabi can therefore be a useful personal development exercise (Beatty, Leigh, & Lund Dean, 2009).

This workshop will focus on accessible syllabus design as technique faculty members can use to promote inclusion in their classrooms. This proposal frames the issues of syllabus design drawing upon Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002), and disability and diversity frameworks of ableism and inclusion.

Theoretical Background

Most campus courses, technology, and student services are designed for the so-called "average" student, yet our students come to campus with a spectrum of multiple intelligences and learning modalities, and with different levels of preparation. The concept of accessibility is often used in disability studies because persons with disabilities may not be able to access services in same way as the "average" people for whom the service was designed. In the classroom, this means that a student with disabilities may not be able to interact with the course as the instructor intended, since the course was designed with able-bodied people in mind. For example, students with low vision, color blindness, or issues like macular degeneration might have difficulty reading a regular text syllabus. Students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing might need transcripts of lectures and videos. Others with dyslexia and learning disabilities might have trouble reading and comprehending large sections of text. The point is that faculty who have not considered these kinds of impairments may be inadvertently applying ableist assumptions to their course design. At its core, accessibility is an issue of diversity and inclusion (Passman & Green, 2009).

The social model of disability takes a civil rights approach to argue that people are disabled by attitudinal and structural barriers in society, not by their individual impairment or difference. It further argues that removing the barriers creates equality by offering persons with disabilities more autonomy. The courses faculty design are built on a set of assumptions about

what students can and should be able to do – cognitively (e.g., comprehension of college-level reading) and physically (e.g., visual, hearing, and writing abilities). As experts in our fields, we know the core elements that are critical for understanding our disciplines, and we declare these elements explicitly in the course objectives. Yet the modalities of learning we expect may be unexamined and taken for granted; we assume that all or most of our students can read significant passages of text, type a response to a discussion board, or easily identify a statement emphasized in a document with red type. Examining the embedded ableist assumptions in our course design can improve accessibility for students with a range of impairments, and can also create an enhanced learning environment. The good news about improving accessibility is that it generally also improves usability for all students. For example, audio captioning can be helpful for students with learning disabilities or other visual impairments, and also for learners whose native language is different than the audio content, and students who are not able to use audio due to their contextual (ex: a quiet library) and technical situations (ex: no headphones).

Starting with the Course Syllabus

The syllabus is a central course document that serves both instructor and institutional goals – goals which are not always completely aligned. Faculty members rely on the logistics and scheduling functions of the syllabi, using it as a roadmap for the course; for their interests, they might prefer either a simple, "just the facts" syllabus, or a captivating journalistic syllabus that gets students excited about the content of the course. The institutional concerns encompass a broader set of policies and rules, spawning documents which are neither simple nor exciting to read. For example, at my institution, a context of assessment and compliance has generated longer and more detailed syllabi, with new statements periodically added in response to national movements and tragedies. We have a required campus template that includes long blocks of text

on services for students with documented disabilities; a statement on harassment, sexual violence, bias, and discrimination; academic integrity; grade grievance procedures; and campus safety protocols, including how to respond to an active shooter. These statements do convey important information, and we might lament the fact that the learning environment has normalized the need to have such statements (topics for perhaps a future MOBTS session). But the fact is these statements are difficult to read, with boilerplate language crowding the learning space and creating a flat, contractual tone for students' first class impressions. Faculty members sometimes complain that their students don't carefully read the syllabus; yet this might be a good thing, for students to avoid the deadening prose, and to retain some interest and hope for the class at the beginning of the semester.

Accessible Syllabus Design

So what is a conscientious teacher to do? Enter Accessible Syllabus Design, which draws upon the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL promotes the view that accessibility should be designed in from the beginning, instead of retrofitting or accommodating for student needs after the course has been designed. Accommodation is a common practice, but it is problematic because requesting accommodation typically requires registering with disability services and disclosing one's disability or impairment. Many factors enter into the decision to disclose a disability or impairment, and students may prefer to keep this information private. Further, accommodations granted by teachers may be visible to others, generating equity issues among students ("How come Emily gets extra time for the test? That's not fair"). The problems of disclosure and visibility can lead to stigmatization, or fears of stigmatization, which can interfere with student learning and relationship building.

With UDL, accommodation issues are minimized, allowing everyone equal access to the course without needing to ask for special treatment. Anticipating and planning for the diverse needs of all potential users during the design process leads to a course that meets all users' needs in an improved way. Full scale Universal Design for Learning is promoted as a reform movement that encompasses course and curriculum design, and is much broader than syllabus design (Rose & Meyer, 2002; to learn more, visit www.cast.org). For the present proposal, the plan is to start with a small step of redesigning one's syllabus to improve accessibility.

Accessible syllabus design asks faculty members to consider the ways that students' cognitive and physical skills might vary, and to make the syllabus content available across the full range of student capabilities. Students with disabilities may use adaptive technologies to interact with the course. Adaptive technologies refers to equipment that is specifically designed to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities for individuals with disabilities. Adaptive technologies that are relevant for visual impairments that could influence a student's ability to read a course syllabus are screen readers, screen magnifiers, and braille embossers. These tools rely on scannability and on properly formatted headings to navigate documents and websites. This workshop will outline formatting tips to make course syllabi more accessible and more compatible with screen readers.

Learning Objectives

After participating in the proposed workshop, conference members will:

- Be aware of the limitations of traditional syllabi for students with disabilities, and how these limitations can be barriers for diversity and inclusion

- Understand the assumptions of Universal Design for Learning and how they inform Accessible Syllabus Design

- Be able to apply principles of accessible syllabus design to propose simple improvements to convert a traditional syllabus to an accessible one

Session Description and Overview

This session can be run as a 30 or 60 minute session, depending on scheduling availability (60 minutes is preferred). If only 30 minutes are available, the activity portion could be eliminated. No special equipment is needed for this session.

After setting the context and introducing participants to the principles of Accessible Syllabus Design, the proposed activity asks participants to consider and propose specific improvements they can make to their own course syllabi to improve accessibility, and then to share their ideas and comments in small groups. Ideally participants would have access to one of their own course syllabi, but the activity can also be done with generic traditional syllabi which the facilitator will have on hand. Session slides and handouts will show examples of before and after syllabi, and participants will be invited to compare and respond to the revised syllabi with some discussion prompts: Which version of the class looks "better" to you, and how do you think your students would respond? Do you find the Accessible format easier to read? If so, which elements are most helpful for you? What do you notice about the tradeoffs between simplicity and white space, versus needing to convey all the policy information?

Appendix A is a tip sheet for converting a syllabus from traditional to an accessible format. Appendix B is an example of an accessible syllabus. More before and after examples will be available in the workshop. Further examples can also be seen at Tulane's Accessible Syllabus website, at www.accessiblesyllabus.com (the author is not affiliated with Tulane in any way…. It's just a good resource).

TOPICS	TIMING
Introduction of concepts • Improving accessibility for students with disabilities, including invisible disabilities • Types of disabilities and how they influence student capabilities • Universal Design for Learning and accessible syllabus design principles	0:00 – 15:00 (includes a few extra minutes for latecomers, hugs, and getting settled)
Before and after examples of Accessible Syllabi, highlighting how the changes have improved accessibility If 30 min session – move to 5 minutes of questions and wrapup	15:00 – 25:00
Activity: Using participant's own course syllabi or facilitator-provided examples, propose 5 to 7 improvements that will improve syllabus accessibility; Share and discuss in small groups	25:00 – 45:00
Activity debrief – small groups share questions and comments about their current and/or revised syllabus with the whole group	45:00 – 55:00
Wrap-up and Conclusion – common comments and themes are identified, participants are encouraged to modify their syllabi to incorporate more accessibility elements	55:00 – 59:59

References

Beatty, J. E., Leigh, J., & Lund Dean, K. (2009). Philosophy Rediscovered: Exploring the Connections between Teaching Philosophies, Educational Philosophies, and Philosophy. *Journal of Management Education*, *33*(1), 99–114.

Passman, T., & Green, R. A. (2009). Start with the syllabus: Universal design from the top. *Journal of Access Services*, *6*(1–2), 48–58. http://doi.org/10.1080/15367960802247916

Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal design for learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Appendix A: Tips for Accessible Document Formatting

- Increase white space, and be concise. Avoid long blocks of text. Consider moving boilerplate policies to an appendix or to post a hyperlink to online sites

- Use 12 to 14 pt sans serif font (Helvetica, Arial), with 1.5 line spacing. Consider use a typeface that is specifically designed to be dyslexia friendly, such as Lexie Readable (https://www.dafont.com/lexia-readable.font) or Open Dyslexic (https://www.opendyslexic.org/). Comic Sans is also good.

- Use headings, with the headings style defined in your word processor (not just regular bold type)

- Use left justification (leave the jagged right edge). Do not center the text. Full left and right justification gives the perception of a wall of words.

- Use smaller paragraphs that are 2-4 sentences long, and use columns to break up large blocks of text

- Use your software's built in list function (bullets or numbered list), and include space between each line. Do not create lists manually because they cannot be read by screenreaders.

- If you use color to distinguish portions of your syllabus, use a strong color contrast. If you are emphasizing text, do not use color as the only mechanism. Use **color + bold, or COLOR + SIZE.**

- Screen readers can't search by color, so avoid coding your syllabus by color (e.g. "My responses are listed in blue").

- Screen readers can't tell when important text is bolded, so use text such as "This is important:"

- If you use tables, look up the formatting guidelines for screen readers

    o Check box that says "repeat header row at top of each page"

    o In Table Properties, include alt text to describe the content of the table

- Provide a caption or alt text for images on the syllabus.

- Use accessible hyperlinks – by embedding them in text and making them meaningful out of context. The text should be concise and describe where the text leads. Don't say "click here for the usability table", instead say "Refer to the usability table". This matters because screen readers can scan a page to find the hyperlinks, and "here" is not descriptive text.

- Type out email addresses with the @ sign included, and hyperlink to the text of the email address

Appendix B: Sample excerpt of Accessible Syllabus (anonymized)

XXXX SCHOOL XXXXXX   --LOGO IMAGE--

College of Business

Organization Behavior ONLINE

OB XXX   Winter 2019   CRN: XXX   3 credit hours

Teacher Contact Information
Professor XXX   Office location
Xxx email address   Office hours: Wednesday, 3:30-5:45PM
Xxx phone number

Course Description
A survey course which provides a basic understanding of individual, inter-personal and group behavior in organizations, and its application in the practice of management. Topics include: personality and attitudes, motivation, groups and teams, leadership, power, ethics, structure and organizational design, culture, and decision-making. Prerequisite: Graduate standing.

Course Objectives
Organizational behavior addresses human behavior in the workplace from the perspectives of individuals, groups, and organizations. This class gives you the knowledge to identify human resource and organizational issues, as well as some frameworks to develop effective solutions. By completing this class, you will:
- Improve your critical thinking skills as you investigate the relationships between organizational practices and human behavior.
- Develop your decision-making effectiveness by practicing problem identification, analysis, the proposal of theoretically informed solutions, and evaluation.
- Improve your written communication skills to explain and justify your reasoning and decisions.
- Foster a more confident professional identity.

This graduate level course will draw upon the work experiences of class members through Canvas discussions, and class members are encouraged to contribute their insights and perspectives.

How to Succeed in This Course - Course Logistics

1. Purchase the course materials – each student needs his/her own access to these materials

Text: Organization Behavior 17th edition, Robbins and Judge (2016). ISBN 978-0134103983. It is also acceptable to use the 16th edition (ISBN 978-0133507645)

Case packet: Available from this [link for Harvard Business School Publishing](#).

Online assessment: Ethical Lens Inventory – register online using the [link for EthicsGame](#). The class code is GV3W2D. More detailed registration information is posted on Canvas.

2. Make sure you know how to login to Canvas and that you can access the course.

   All lectures, assignments, and discussions will occur through the Canvas learning management system. You can access Canvas through links at the bottom of XXX main webpage, and at xxx Website. Your login is your 8-digit ID and your password is your BANNER password (also used to check grades and to register for classes). The site includes a Help Desk function if you are unable to log in or have other questions.

3. Review the course schedule for assignment due dates, and record in your calendar.

   This online course follows the schedule shown on page 5 of this syllabus. Weekly topics begin on Mondays and run through the following Sunday night. Important due dates are:

   - Feb 19-21 -Test 1
   - March 1 – Motivation paper due
   - March 24 – Research review paper due
   - April 22-24 -Test 2

4. Review the major assignments to plan your tasks and workload.
   Motivation paper - Compare and contrast the motivation and job attitudes of three employees of a single organization, applying appropriate motivation models.

   Research review paper - Conduct research on an OB topic of your choice, and submit a 6 to 8 page research brief that synthesizes your findings.

5. Understand the course flow
   The materials on Canvas are displayed in the order you will use them. Each week will include an audio lecture. The lectures are intended to highlight and develop content from your textbook. You may be tested on any content in the assigned chapters and course. Most weeks will include small group discussion boards, and you should post at least once on the weekly discussion topic.

6. Review the structure of the online boards and tips for participation, outlined below.

All About Discussion Boards

- **Who?**: Board discussions will be with your learning teams of 6-8 students, created by Canvas. Groups switch after Week 7 so that you can meet additional students in the class.

- **What?**: Wiki style discussion topics present cases or articles that link to weekly concepts. Post your reactions, comments, and responses to others on your board.

- **When?: Boards will open on Monday mornings and close the following Sunday evening.** Please make your first post by Thursday night so you can participate and respond to others on the board.

- **Why?**: The cases and articles illustrate applications of course concepts, and discussing with your teammates helps deepen and reinforce your understanding. Respond and engage with others to apply and develop deeper understanding of course concepts.

How?
- For most boards it helps to listen to the lectures and complete the assigned reading prior to participating. However, even if you have not yet read all the content for the week, you can ask others about content in their posts.

- Quality posts will include some ideas and concepts from the week's topics.

- Designate one member to facilitate the discussion each week, and rotate the leadership as much as possible. The leader/facilitator's role is to pull together member's comments, ask questions, and offer insights.

- Early board posters: Launch the conversation in a way that allows others to contribute; this is a conversation, and you don't have to answer the whole question on your own on the first day. You can show thoughtful preparation and contribute to the group process by inquiring about other's responses, or posing questions for others to consider.

- Late joiners: most of your group members may have posted. You can then offer comments and linkages among the posts that have already been made, or a recap of the main points.

- The time window for the boards goes by surprisingly quickly, so plan to access them early.

- Please keep your board discussions professional and civil. It is fine to disagree and have lively debate, just do so in a respectful way. Avoid personal insults and attacks.

7. The table below describes levels of board participation

Excellent – Wow!!	Posts early in week
	Offers thoughtful post that incorporates ideas/concepts from the lecture
	Asks questions to encourage others to respond
	Responds to others posts with substantive comments and questions
	Demonstrates leadership on the board
	Could also:
	    - If posting first, leave space for others to respond
	    - Share examples that illustrate the concepts
	    - Offer respectful counter positions to develop the conversation

Good – This is a good, strong participant	Does the above behaviors, but fewer in scope or depth Offers thoughtful comments that may or may not relate to weekly concepts
Poor – not enough to work with	Posts very late in week 'One and done' poster – no responses to others posts Post indicates that student has not read any of the preceding comments, and does not connect or link to them - May end up repeating ideas already presented without expanding/developing Rambling and/or unclear posts

8. Review how will you be graded, based on the pie chart below.

Chart Area

Discussion boards 20%

Tests 40%

Research review 20%

Motivation paper 20%
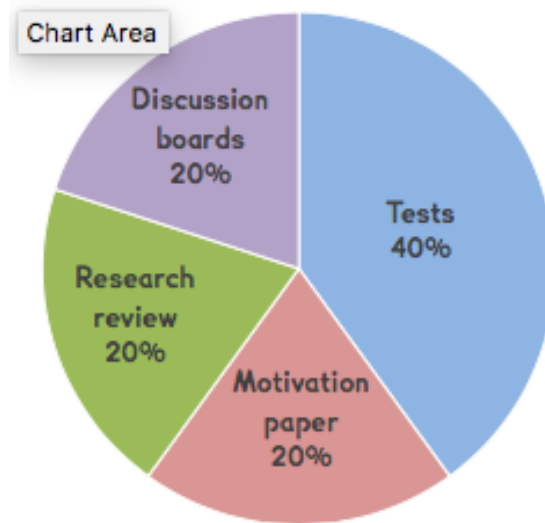
Winter 2019 Course Schedule

For a full list of learning activities, see each weekly module in Canvas.
[EXCERPTED EXAMPLE BELOW – IMAGINE 3 PAGES OF SCHEDULE]

Week: Topic	Deliverables
Week 1 (1/7): Course introduction - What is OB?	**Read**: Chapter 1, the course syllabus, and the research paper assignment **Watch**: Instructor introduction lecture **Discussion board**: All-class discussion board: Introduce yourself, meet others, and share an organizational behavior question
Week 2 (1/14): Attitudes and Job satisfaction	**Read**: Chapter 3 **Discussion board**: Report and compare your results on the job satisfaction survey, available in Canvas **Complete**: Ethical Lens Inventory by 1/21 (from ethics game)
Week 3 (1/21): Personality and values	**Read**: Chapter 5 **Discussion board**: Case – XXX (posted on Canvas)

Course Reference Materials
Important information that you may need or be interested in

Program Goals
The program goals and objectives for the College of Business graduate degrees can be found at xxx Website.

OB 510 contributes to the following learning goals:
1. *Understanding, applying and integrating knowledge about disciplinary concepts,* specifically related to organizational behavior
2. *Communicating effectively*, through written assignments and discussion boards
3. *Appreciating ethics*, through the completion of an ethical perspective survey and lecture

Professor's Teaching Philosophy and the Online Environment
I believe that learning is an active process that requires students' participation, critical inquiry, and reflection. Learning is also a social process, as we learn from each other. There will not be a team project in this class, but you will be learning with a smaller group in team discussion boards so that you can have more personal discussions. The online format offers a platform for more balanced and reflective participation, since we can benefit from the opportunity to re-read our comments before we hit "submit." Open and respectful dialogue is expected and appreciated.

Grading Scale

Grading Scale

A+	97.5 – 100	B+	88.0 – 89.9	C+	77.5 – 79.9	D+	67.5 – 69.9
A	93.0 – 97.4	B	82.5 – 87.9	C	72.5 – 77.4	D	62.5 – 67.4
A-	90.0 – 92.9	B-	80.0 – 82.4	C-	70.0 – 72.4	D-	60.0 – 62.4
						E	< 60

Statement on Academic Integrity
Academic integrity, professional integrity, and personal integrity are interwoven and are relevant to developing and maintaining ethical leadership. As a member of the XXX community, you must be aware of the standards of academic integrity we follow on this campus. Please review the standard academic integrity statement below to make sure you are fully aware of its meaning and implications:

XXX values academic honesty and integrity. Each student has a responsibility to understand, accept, and comply with the University's standards of academic conduct as set forth by the Code of Academic Conduct (xxx Website) as well as policies established by schools and colleges. Cheating, collusion, misconduct, fabrication, and plagiarism are considered serious offenses. Violations will not be tolerated and may result in penalties up to and including expulsion from the University.

For the assignments in this class, you are specifically forbidden from copying other students' test answers (cheating) and from submitting others' written work as your own (plagiarism). This includes copying materials from the web or published materials. In the online environment, it can be harder to determine what constitutes cheating. I read all tests, papers, and discussion posts. Since you are completing similar tasks, your work will share some similarities. Plagiarism, however, is a very high threshold of similarity (taking verbatim work of others). If you are unclear on what constitutes cheating and plagiarism, please be sure to inquire, either with me or through library sources. A student tutorial on plagiarism is available at xxx Website

For more information on XXX policies, see:
Statement on Academic Integrity xxx Website
Academic Code of Conduct XXX Website

Students with Documented Disabilities
The University will make reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. Students need to register with Disability Services (DS) every semester they are enrolled for classes. DS is located in Disability & Counseling Services, 2157 University Center (phone: 313-593-5430). Please contact their office for additional information. To be assured of having services when they are needed, students should register no later than the end of the add/drop deadline of each term.

Harassment, Sexual Violence, Bias, and Discrimination

XXXX recognizes that students have a right to study in a safe
atmosphere free of sexual violence, harassment, bias and discrimination. Should you wish to
report an incident of sexual assault, harassment, bias and discrimination, visit xxxxWebsite

Grade Grievance

A student may grieve a final course grade or a grade on an examination, project, thesis or any other graded material required for graduation. This grievance process is intended to provide the student the protection against evaluations which are prejudicial, arbitrary, or capricious. Examples of grading problems which can be grieved are clerical errors, prejudicial evaluation, and inconsistent or inequitably applied standards of evaluation.

There is a presumption that the grades assigned are correct and therefore the student has the burden of proof in the grievance process (i.e., he or she must establish a clerical error; capricious or prejudicial evaluation; or inconsistent or inequitably applied standards of evaluation). To start this process, the student should contact the Department Chair or Program Director before the end of the fifth week of classes in the first full term following the term in which the disputed grade was issued. The department chair of XXX is XXX (xxx@xxx.edu).