

Plotting the Course— The Nature and Scope of College Syllabi

Many educators see the class syllabus as the *most* important document in the educational process. In fact, Schoenfeld and Magnan¹ refer to it as a “map” for the teacher’s journey through the semester. If faculty think of themselves as tour guides, then their schedules (or syllabi) should indicate the major sights and activities that will occur along the way.

Exactly what should a syllabus contain? The dictionary defines it as “a concise statement of the main points of a course of study or subject.” This obviously leaves room for personal, departmental, and institutional interpretation. (What constitutes “concise”? And what makes up “the main points”?)

Still, the syllabus is viewed as the official document of the college course. According to Greive, it “should be shared with students and filed as a permanent contribution to the instructional archives of the college.”²

Because of individual interpretation, there is a disturbing level of confusion about syllabi. A *concise* statement to one faculty member may mean simply “Chapter V,” while to another, it may mean citing the major points of Chapter V, and describing each one, using complete sentences. One thing is certain, however: Developing a quality syllabus forces teachers to evaluate the topics and issues they can cover and still remain within the constraints of time, place, available resources, and their students’ limitations.

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Building the Syllabus

Developing an acceptable syllabus is almost always a multi-step process. A meaningful syllabus will have several major parts, including the following:

1. The complete name of the course and its number.
2. The name and title of the faculty member.
3. The faculty member’s office hours and telephone numbers(s)—E-mail address, too!
4. The text or tests and outside readings required for the course.

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5. The course objectives.
6. The assignments and projects to be completed by the students.
7. A listing of resources, outside readings, field trips, etc.³

Objectives. Listing the course objectives is one of the most important—and difficult—tasks. Although faculty may be tempted to include everything of importance in the course, as a general rule, 10 to 14 objectives will suffice. Teachers should be certain, however, that the objectives are reachable, teachable, and measurable.

Student activities. When we think about teaching, we tend to consider only what takes place within the classroom. But because most student learning occurs *outside* the classroom, planning how to help students when they are not in class is vital.

Consequently, the syllabus should also describe out-of-class activities that will help students attain the course requirements. This usually means specifying in some detail such items as outside reading, laboratory activities, projects, assignments, etc.

Teachers are wise to give significant attention to the reason for each activity and how it relates to the course. Students will thus recognize that the class is well-planned and there is a purpose for everything they are asked to do.

Course requirements. The syllabus should also include a detailed description of both course and student requirements. As a result, students cannot later legitimately claim to have been unaware of what was expected of them. In fact, this section of the syllabus often lists the

class meetings by day and date, with each class day's specific reading and homework assignments, as well as scheduled activities and class topics. Excessive detail is better than too little.

Resources and references. Finally, the syllabus should include a complete listing of resources, outside readings, bibliographies, and guest lecturers. Required outside reading and library assignments from reserved books should be designated. Here, too, excessive detail may be helpful.

Instructors should not be concerned if the syllabus grows to five pages or more. Students are usually thankful for such detail, and the teacher will be protected if evidence of course content or teacher preparation is required.

Reflections and Comments

Syllabi are usually handed out and discussed on the first day of class. It may also be a good idea to go over the syllabus at the *second* class meeting with a more pointed description of expected activities in relation to certain assignments and objectives. Some faculty even attach sample reports to guide students.

A quality syllabus often requires considerable initial work, but only minimal effort for later updates. The energy invested in its development should pay rich dividends. Greive⁴ contends that a syllabus is both a scientific document and a work of art, and should, therefore, be respected as each in its development and use.

Many teachers include in the syllabus a brief description of the course to furnish information for students trying to decide whether to take the course.

Once the syllabus has been prepared, it should be fairly easy to write a course description. Helpful descriptions should normally answer such questions as: (a) What can students expect to be able to do as a result of completing the course? (b) Who should take the course, i.e., what types of persons is it intended for? (c) Are there any special requirements, e.g., skills, prerequisites, and materials? And (d) Why should someone want to enroll in this course?

A sample description for Introduction to Interior Design is presented below:

This course is designed for those who

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*have little or no background in interior design, but who would like to know more about the principles involved in creating a pleasant environment. Upon completion of eight sessions, students should be able to use the fundamental principles of floor plans, textiles, color, furniture, accessories, window and floor coverings in selecting, purchasing, and arranging home furnishings. Purchase of the optional text Inside Today's Home is highly recommended.*⁵

McKeachie⁶ cautions that assignment schedules carried in syllabi should not be too complete, detailed, or precise. He defends this assertion with the following arguments: First, there is little point in faculty committing themselves in print to courses of action they may later regard as ill advised. Second, circumstances inevitably arise which make it necessary to deviate slightly from the schedule. And, finally, students themselves are important variables in determining the pace and structure of the course. While some classes rush along at a fine pace, others move more slowly. On the other hand, some classes develop great interest in one topic, others in another.

Some faculty may worry that developing a syllabus indicates that courses are *teacher* centered and that their students' needs are not being adequately considered. But that is not necessarily true. Research at the University of Michigan reveals that students tend to judge teachers who take a nondirective, student-centered role as not much interested in the class.⁷ Still, syllabi should normally allow students the freedom to explore side roads according to their own interests and needs, as well as the joys of serendipity and chance!⁸

One final observation: Restraint in detailing every expected outcome should permit a spiritual serendipity of sorts. Teachers cannot "package" the Holy Spirit to perform by their insistence in enlightening the minds of students. But they can encourage students to consider factual content in light of their ethical and religious values. Teachers can arrange for small-group and oral reporting opportunities to help students explore ways to make relational applications.

And, finally, faculty in Christian institutions may ask students how course content informs their faith, and how their faith affects the application of such information. For some classes, the instructor can easily express these goals in the form of objectives leading to assessment strategies, while in other courses such goals may become a part of the unspoken agenda of the teacher. As Faw and Van Brummelen have observed, "The primary purpose of student assessment and evaluation is to furnish evidence of learners' progress toward certain explicit and implicit goals."⁹

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