



Learning-Centered Syllabus

MEASURING THE PROMISE

ASSESSING THE COURSE SYLLABUS



Quick Introductions

- First Year Experience for Faculty working groups - history
- Today's participants – what would you like to take away from this meeting?



Learning-Centered Syllabus

MEASURING THE PROMISE

GUIDE TO ASSESSING THE COURSE SYLLABUS



Learning Outcomes

- Review the characteristics of a learning-centered syllabus
- Revisit the syllabus learning environment section: promise, tone, inclusivity

Why is a learning centered syllabus so important, particularly at UCM?

Of Our Fall 2015 Freshman Class,

- First Generation status 72%*
- Speak another language or English and another language at home 68.4% (all)
- Low income families 81% (all)

*IRDS, UCM



Why is a learning centered syllabus so important, particularly at UCM?

- Convey academic expectations to at-risk student population, support *all* students (Collins, 1997; Slattery and Carlson, 2005)
 - Most first year students have never seen a syllabus?!
- 

Required Elements of a Course includes:

According to [policy](#), a complete course outline includes the following*:

- A summary of course content, sometimes referred to as “Course Description.”
- Learning goals
- Course learning outcomes
- How those course learning outcomes connect to the program or degree outcomes
- For courses counting towards General Education, includes how the course addresses three or more of the [Guiding Principles for General Education](#) at UC Merced
- Grading tools (e.g. types of assignments, exams, grading policy)
- Format of the course (e.g. lecture, lab, practicum, etc.)
- Topics the course will cover
- Types of reading (e.g., textbooks, novels, essays, journal articles, etc.)
- Conjoined courses will require a full syllabus.

* assessment.ucmerced.edu/academic/undergraduate-course-request-process



Leveraging the Promise and Invitation of Course Syllabi

Faye Chechowich and Matt DeLong

Taylor University

College in Upland, Indiana

11/7/14





Instructor's View of syllabus

- Communication mechanism
- Planning tool for instructors
- Course plan for students



Fink, 2012



Purpose of the Syllabus

- Syllabus as a contract
- Syllabus as a permanent record
- Syllabus as a learning tool



Parkes and Harris, 2002



Effect of Tone

- Syllabus tone affects initial perception of the instructor
- Warm language evokes the perception that the instructor is motivated to teach the course and is approachable and available.



Harnish and Bridges, 2011



Controlling Language

- Faculty tend to write syllabi using language that appears inclusive and collaborative, but really is not.

Baecker, 1998





Activity: Analyze this policy

“As a college student, you are an adult so whether you attend class is up to you.”

What learning goals, student behaviors, or course structures does this policy encourage? Does this policy work well for all class sizes? Is it learner centered and, if not, how might it be revised?



Visual Elements

- Most syllabi have no visual image elements.
- Some use graphic design to enhance readability; some use images to add aesthetic appeal.
- Very few use images to illustrate or enhance content of the syllabus



King, 2013



The Promising Syllabus

- Promises and Opportunities
- Students' role in realizing promises
- Summary about the nature and progress of learning



Bain, 2004



The Learning-Centered Syllabus

- Shift from what the instructor covers to all that is needed for learning and development.

O'Brian, et al., 2008





Not Your Granddaddy's Syllabus: Investigating Student Perceptions of Course Syllabi

Palmer M., Wheeler L., and Aneece I.

University of Virginia



WINNER OF THE 2015 ROBERT J. MENGES AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
POD Network Conference 2015

Content-focused syllabi

- * Instructor information
- * Course description
- Course Outcomes
- * Course materials
- * Course schedule
- Assessment of learning
- * Evaluation procedures
- * Policies & expectations
- Additional information
(e.g., "how to learn")

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A Learning-centered syllabus...

Guide to assessing the focus of syllabi:

- Learning goals and outcomes
 - Assessment Activities
 - Schedule
 - Classroom Environment
- 

Learning-focused syllabi are characterized by...

- an engaging, question-driven course description
- long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals
- clear, measurable learning outcomes
- robust assessment and activity descriptions
- a detailed course schedule framed in “beautiful questions”
- an inviting, approachable, and motivating tone
- a focus on student success

Cullen, R., & Harris, M. (2009). Assessing learner-centeredness through course syllabi. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34, 115-25. 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.

Syllabi: content-focused (CFS)

Course Overview

This course emphasizes the major political, social, economic and intellectual developments in the nation from the Civil War to the present and aims to challenge students to critically analyze these developments. The course also examines how events and developments that occurred prior to 1865 influenced the nation's evolution after the Civil War. The course will cover such topics as Reconstruction, the New Deal, the Great Depression, the Atomic Age, the Cold War, and the 60's. Due to the constraints of the semester, the 1970's-80's will only be covered generally, while the 1990's-today will not be covered.

Required Texts

There are two books that we will be reading for this course, a textbook and primary source documenting the African American experience during this time period through contemporaneous documents, diaries, visuals, and texts. The textbook is meant to supplement lectures; some material in the text will not be discussed in class and some information from lectures will either not be mentioned at all or touched on only briefly in the textbook. It is expected that each student will have read the assignment in the textbook before coming to class.

- *U.S. History, Volume II: 1865-Present*, online textbook
- *Making Freedom: African Americans in U.S. History*

Course Requirements

Each student in the course will be expected to complete three exams and one essay during the semester.

Exams – Each exam will consist of three sections: a n identification section, a short answer section, and an essay section. Review sheets will be distributed before the exams to assist students in their

Syllabi: learning-focused

“If the study of history does nothing more than teach us humility, skepticism and awareness of ourselves, then it has done something useful.”

M. MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (2009)

A bit about the course...

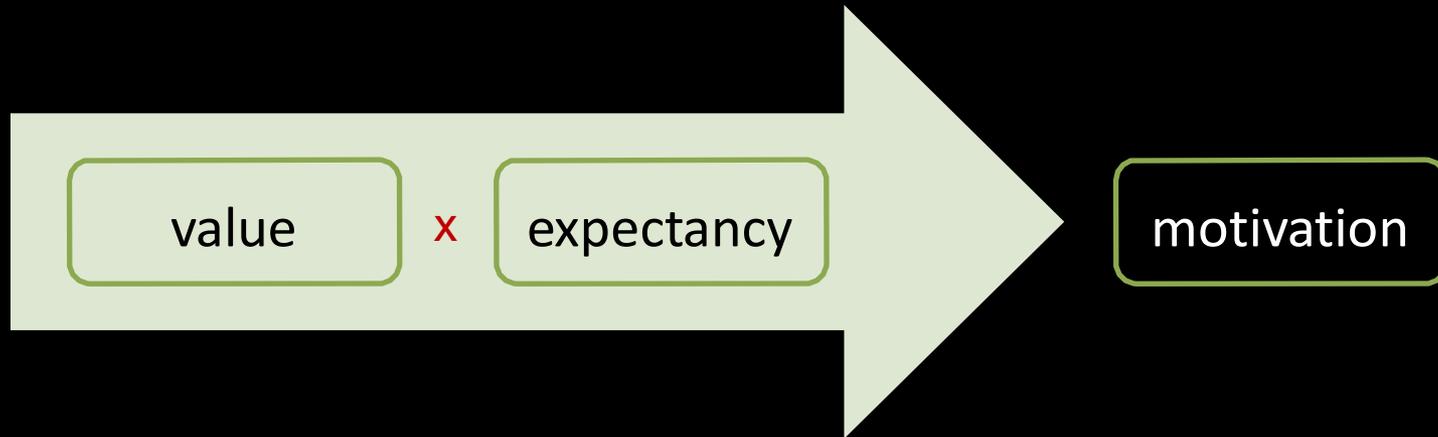
You probably have studied U.S. history before, exploring the major themes, events, and people who have shaped this country. In your other history courses, you may have learned certain historical information and then been required to write clear, evidence-based arguments about the past. We will do that, but I expect you will find this course to be different in useful and challenging ways.

Together, we will explore how and why individuals chose to act—or not to act—in response to the local, national, and global forces that have shaped the United States since 1865. For example, how did Americans respond to the U.S. acquiring and using the atomic bomb? and, how were they affected by the 20th-century tech boom? Historians call this approach *social history*, a major trend in historical analysis over the past few decades. This focus on the lives of ordinary (and not so ordinary) people can help you deeply understand the past. It also might prompt you to reflect on how and why *you* choose to act (or not to act) in response to the local, national, and global forces shaping our world now.

To allow you to experience doing what historians do, you will get to contribute to an oral history project. This project, developed in partnership with a local community organization, will encourage you to ask some big questions about how to do historical research and historical meaning as well as to explore the relationship between personal/local stories and national ones.

What you'll learn along the way...

Historians think a lot about how to make valid historical arguments and what counts as historical evidence. This course is designed to help you develop these habits of mind. Specifically, you will learn



If students do not value the task or do not expect to succeed, they will not be motivated.

Results: Syllabus structure

Question	CFS Group n=66 (SD)	LFS Group n=61 (SD)
The syllabus is well organized	5.36 (.78)	5.18 (.74)
The syllabus clearly defines course expectations	5.03 (.93)	5.05 (.69)
There is not enough detail in the syllabus to understand the course expectations	2.83 (1.13)	2.13 (1.06)**
The syllabus is easily readable⁺	5.24 (.88)	4.34 (1.20)**
The syllabus is difficult to follow⁺	1.89 (.91)	2.65 (1.23)**
The focus of the syllabus is on learning⁺	4.06 (1.25)	5.23 (.67)**
The focus of the syllabus is on content and/or policies	4.86 (1.01)	4.31 (1.15)**
I will likely need to continue to refer to the syllabus throughout the course ⁺	4.56 (1.34)	4.89 (.93)

Note. Likert scale from 1=Strongly disagree to 6=Strongly agree. ⁺violates Levene's Homogeneity of variance (p<.05), Kruskal-Wallis test; *significant p<.05; **significant p<.01.

Results: Syllabus tone

Question	CFS Group n=66 (SD)	LFS Group n=61 (SD)
The tone of the syllabus is positive, respectful, and inviting ⁺	4.17 (1.24)	5.05 (.90)**
The syllabus projects a sense that the instructor cares about me and my learning ⁺	3.65 (1.20)	5.13 (.87)**
The syllabus communicates high expectations ⁺	4.38 (1.20)	4.89 (.86)*
The syllabus projects confidence that students can meet expectations through hard work ⁺	3.98 (1.18)	4.93 (.91)**
The syllabus describes a course that is academically rigorous ⁺	4.00 (1.25)	4.98 (.70)**
The syllabus is condescending to my intelligence⁺	2.89 (1.44)	2.46 (1.06)

Note. Likert scale from 1=Strongly disagree to 6=Strongly agree. ⁺violates Levene's Homogeneity of variance (p<.05), Kruskal-Wallis test; *significant p<.05; **significant p<.01

Results: Syllabus tone

I thought the tone sounded very personable and friendly. (LFS)

The tone of the syllabus makes the professor seem cold, uncompromising, and unfriendly...I would immediately think the professor is a hard ass – I'd expect a great number of students to drop the class after receiving the syllabus. (CFS)

Results: Syllabus interest

Question	CFS Group n=66 (SD)	LFS Group n=61 (SD)
The syllabus is boring	3.70 (1.18)	3.52 (1.15)
The syllabus suggests that there is a lot of busy work in the course	3.18 (1.46)	3.48 (1.36)
The syllabus makes clear how the course content will be important in my life⁺	2.86 (1.36)	4.57 (.97)**
The syllabus is interesting	3.30 (1.16)	3.85 (1.00)**
The syllabus makes me want to take this class.	3.55 (1.32)	3.77 (1.13)

Note. Likert scale from 1=Strongly disagree to 6=Strongly agree. ⁺violates Levene's Homogeneity of variance ($p < .05$), Kruskal-Wallis test; *significant $p < .05$; **significant $p < .01$

Results: Syllabus interest

The syllabus is extremely comprehensive but also gets me excited to work with the teacher and participate in the class.

I like how they emphasize the realistic aspects of learning and participating, rather than simply laying out the work to be done. (LFS)

I don't have strong feelings about it. The formatting is clean and boring, no real issues. Doesn't seem interesting a course though. (CFS)

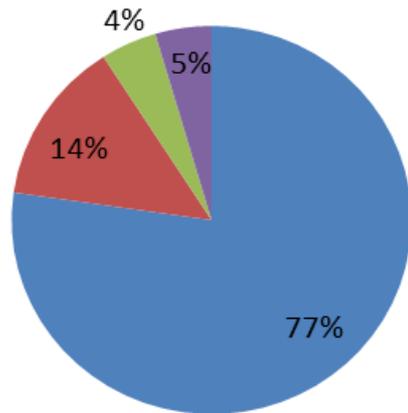
Results: Course structure

	CFS, n=66 (SD)	LFS, n=61 (SD)
Lecture ⁺	3.85 (.64)	3.26 (.84)**
Instructor-led discussion ⁺	1.95 (1.22)	3.10 (.60)**
Student-led discussion	.80 (1.08)	2.52 (.85)**
Group work	.63 (.88)	2.39 (.82)**
Debate	.64 (.93)	2.18 (1.04)**
Student presentations	.52 (.94)	1.64 (.86)**
Working on course projects	.52 (.99)	1.31 (.87)**

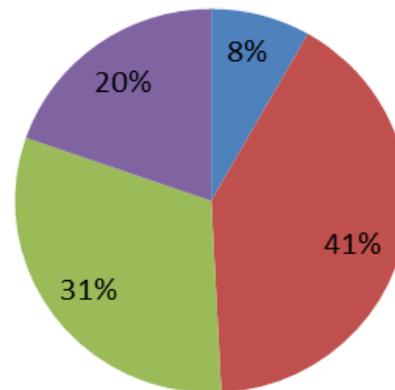
Note. Likert scale from 0=not at all, 1=1-2times/semester, 2=every few weeks, 3=some each class, 4=most of every class. ⁺ violates Levene's Homogeneity of variance ($p < .05$), Kruskal-Wallis test. ** significant $p < .01$.

Results: Course structure

Students Perception of a Content-focused Syllabus Class Structure



Students Perception of a Learning-focused Syllabus Class Structure



- Lecture
- Lecture/discussion
- Discussion/engagement
- Unsure/NR

Results: Course structure

I would expect some form of lecture about the material, then some sort of engaging activity, such as a group analysis of a historical document or a class debate. (LFS)

Lecture, lecture and more lecture. (CFS)

Results: Learning

Construct	CFS n=66 (SD)	LFS n=61 (SD)
I expect to learn a lot in this course	3.89 (1.05)	4.54 (.92)**
This course would help me learn important concepts	3.70 (1.05)	4.28 (1.07)**
This course would help me learn valuable study skills	3.50 (1.17)	3.93 (1.12)*
This course would help me understand how experts approach this topic	3.33 (1.19)	4.41 (1.02)**
This course would teach me knowledge and skills applicable during college ⁺	3.39 (1.38)	4.08 (1.01)**
This course would teach me knowledge and skills applicable for my future career	2.85 (1.36)	3.15 (1.15)

Note. Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree. + violates Levine's Homogeneity of variance ($p < .05$), Kruskal-Wallis test. * significant $p < .05$. ** significant $p < .01$.



Results: Learning

Always keep up with the readings, and not just read them but form opinions and thoughts about them that they would express during lively in-class discussions. They would have to develop this personal historical type thinking and utilize it throughout their writing assignments. (LFS)



Results: Instructor

Construct	Question	CFS n=66 (SD)	LFS n=61 (SD)
Approachability	Instructor is approachable.	3.50 (1.14)	5.11 (.78)**
	Instructor cares about my success.	3.83 (1.12)	5.06 (.82)**
	Instructor cares about me as a person.	3.23 (1.08)	4.57 (.85)**
Instruction	Instructor encourages student-teacher interaction.	3.48 (1.21)	5.02 (.72)**
	Instructor helps student discover value in course content.	3.70 (1.04)	5.15 (.79)**
Expectations	Instructor has set high expectations and will help me meet them.	3.95 (1.03)	4.98 (.74)**

Note. Constructs developed from inductive coding of qualitative data. Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree. ** significant $p < .001$ using Kruskal-Wallis test for all individual items.

Results: Instructor

The instructor seems to expect a lot from his students, but he also seems encouraging and understanding. (LFS)

He/she genuinely cares that the students LEARN the material and not just simply memorize it. (LFS)

Unfriendly, unapproachable, STRICT. (CFS)

The instructor seems strict and very concerned about policy less than students learning. (CFS)

Summary

- Compared to CFS participants, LFS participants had significantly more positive perceptions of...
 - the document itself
 - the course described by the syllabus
 - and the instructor associated with the course
- Participants viewed the LFS as a useful, organizing document, the course as an interesting, relevant, and rigorous learning experience, and the instructor as a caring and supportive individual integral to the learning process.



Implications

- The document matters(!) and instructors have little to gain by not creating an LFS.
- An LFS is capable of influencing *positive motivation before* a student ever steps into a classroom.
- But, instructors need to discuss the purpose of the syllabus explicitly with students as well as how to use it effectively.
- Syllabus redesign is a means not an end - *instructor reflection*.



A Learning-centered syllabus...

Guide to assessing the focus of syllabi:

- Learning goals and outcomes
 - Assessment Activities
 - Schedule
 - Classroom Environment
- 



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Classroom Learning Environment

- Promise, Tone and Inclusivity:
 - Tone is positive, respectful, inviting
 - Fosters positive motivation, describes value of course, promotes content as a vehicle for learning
 - Communicates high expectations, projects confidence of success
 - Syllabus is well organized, easy to navigate, requires interaction
- 



Classroom Learning Environment

- The learning environment is supportive and invites students to engage in and take ownership of their own learning.

How do we achieve this?





Classroom Learning Environment

- 1) The tone of the document is positive, respectful, inviting, and directly addresses the student as a competent, engaged learner.
- 



Classroom Learning Environment

- 2) The syllabus signposts a learning environment that fosters positive motivation, one that promotes a learning orientation rather than a performance one. The document describes the potential value of the course in the learner's current and post-course life (cognitive, personal, social, civic, and/or professional) in a clear and dynamic way. It clearly communicates that content is used primarily as a vehicle for learning, to understand core principles in the discipline and promote critical thinking and other significant learning objectives.



Classroom Learning Environment

3) Syllabus clearly communicates high expectations and projects confidence that students can meet them through hard work.





Classroom Learning Environment

4) The syllabus is well organized and easy to navigate. It is clear that students will need to continually interact with the document and the resources it provides throughout the course.





Learning Classroom Environment

- In small groups, let's review your class syllabus :
 - Think: identify two or three you'd like to change
 - Pair: Share those with the person sitting next to you
 - Share: Share them with the rest of the group
- 



Learning Goals and Outcomes

- Learning goals encompass full range of Fink's dimensions of significant learning
 - Course level learning outcomes are clearly articulated and use specific action verbs
 - Learning outcomes are appropriately pitched
- 



Assessment Activities

- Outcomes and assessments are aligned
- Major summative assessment activities are clearly defined
- Plans for frequent formative assessment with immediate feedback
- Assessments are adequately paced and scaffolded
- Grading information is included but separate from assessment; it is aligned with outcomes



Schedule

- Course schedule is fully articulated and logically sequenced
- 



Classroom Activities

- Assessments, and outcomes are aligned
 - Learning activities are derived from evidence-based practices
 - Learning activities likely to actively engage students
- 



Resources

Proceedings of the 2014 POD Network Conference; Chechowich F. and DeLong M. (2014) *Leveraging the Promise and Invitation of Course Syllabi*.

Cullen, R., & Harris, M. (2009). Assessing learner-centeredness through course syllabi. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34, 115-25. 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.

Proceedings of the 2015 POD Network Conference Presentation. Palmer, M., Wheeler L., Anece I., (2015). Not your Granddaddy's Syllabus: Investigating Student Perceptions of Course Syllabi.



Weimer, M. (1993) *Learner-centered teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.