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Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Developing a Course Syllabus

Three strong beliefs associated with a course syllabus:

The syllabus is the key tangible evidence of planning from instructor to the world.

The planning manifested through the syllabus can reduce, before a class even meets, about half the work for teaching a course.

The syllabus serves as a communication device and contract to shift the responsibility for learning to the student.

A course syllabus can be justified from an administrative, accreditation, instructor, or student perspective. These are the main groups that can benefit from a complete, detailed, and precise organization of a course. These varied groups can all be satisfied with the same document, a course syllabus. Below are 17 possible functions of a syllabus.

1. Describing course content scope
2. Communicating course focus
3. Suggesting prerequisites
4. Detailing logistics
5. Identifying course goals
6. Sequencing/scheduling instruction
7. Identifying performance objectives
8. Constituting a contract
9. Identifying reference material
10. Providing modifications base
11. Motivating students
12. Permitting self monitoring
13. Facilitating optional learning activities
14. Establishing evaluation system
15. Advertising/promoting/recruiting clientele
16. Serving as an articulation tool
17. Meeting accreditation requirements

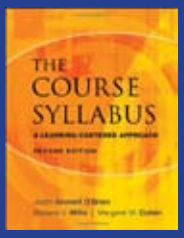
The principal purpose of a syllabus is to inform students in a formal and timely way of the nature and content of the course, policies and procedures that will apply, and logistics involved in participating in classes. In addition to being informative, however, a syllabus is also a promise of yours that is both explicit in what it states will be part of the course, and implicit in what it infers (by not including) will not be part of the course.

The syllabus needs to be consistent with the latest approved curriculum action, and everything done or required in the class at any time throughout the term should be in agreement with what the syllabus states or does not state. Additional textbooks should not be required during the term, the grading system should not be significantly altered, important projects should not be required if not explained or provided for in the syllabus, attendance should not be graded if the syllabus does not make it clear that it will be factored into the final grade, etc. If anything will be significant and unique, it should be explained in the syllabus, or it would better be left until another term. A well planned and well written syllabus is always well worth the time and effort required to prepare it. A weak syllabus, on the other hand, or no syllabus, could result in serious personal, professional, and legal problems.

David E. Vogler; Developing a Course Syllabus; Performance Instruction: Planning, Delivering, Evaluating; 1991; Faculty Developement Teaching Tips; [http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/develsyl.htm]; April 25, 2011

BOOK

The Course Syllabus:



A Learning-Centered Approach
2nd Edition

When it was first published in 1997, The Course Syllabus became the gold standard reference for both new and experienced college faculty. Like the first edition, this book is based on a learner-centered approach. Because faculty members are now deeply committed to engaging students in learning, the syllabus has evolved into a useful, if lengthy, document. Today's syllabus provides details about course objectives, requirements and expectations, and also includes information about teaching philosophies, specific activities and the rationale for their use, and tools essential to student success.

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Questions & Questioning

QUESTIONS CAN BE A POWERFUl tool for the teacher and questioning techniques can elicit valuable information. And, both questions and questioning can be challenging to do well: to borrow an old phrase about computers, "garbage in, garbage out." The following analyses of questions and recommendations on techniques are provided as guidelines for both oral discourse and written assessments.

Analysis as to thinking required

- Knowledge -- recall specific information; avoid using solely knowledge questions.
- Comprehension -- translate or interpret information, putting it in one's own words.
- Application -- apply information to a novel situation.
- Analysis -- examine elements of a whole, relationships among parts, or operating principles.
- Synthesis -- organize information for a new solution or product.
- Evaluation -- make judgements using information, with identification of the bases for them.

Analysis as to type of response

- Closed questions have but a single correct answer; use them sparingly to assess whether students have achieved understanding of specific content or directions.
- Convergent questions have a few correct answers; use them to elicit summaries or bring closure to a discussion.
- Divergent questions allow for many answers to be correct; use them to open a discussion or elicit students' current understanding of a topic.
- Open questions allow for almost all answers to be acceptable; use them as for divergent questions.

Phrasing Techniques

Ambiguous questions do not make clear what kind of response or information is wanted. Even divergent and open questions should clarify the subject to be addressed and provide guidance for how to respond.

Planning questions requires evaluation of the information desired in the response, the type of thinking required, and the possible answers. Plan questions in advance so that you can return to them with a fresh view later; you'll be amazed how many new/"wrong" answers show up.

Do not rephrase or add to a question once it has been asked. This interrupts students' thinking. And, do not use yes/no phrasing: can you…, do you…, will you…, could you…

Probing Techniques

Extending probes are questions that ask the student to say more. They can be as simple as: "Can you add to that?" "And then what?" "Please go on."

Clarifying probes ask the student to explain more clearly or to go beyond a simple answer. "Would you rephrase, please?" "What would be an example?" "What do you mean by (x)?"

Justifying probes ask the student to think critically, to identify evidence, assumptions, or reasoning. "What evidence suggests that?" "How did you come to that answer?"

Redirecting probes ask other students to respond to the same question or a response from another student. "What do you think about it?" "What makes you agree or disagree with (y)?"

Other Techniques

Using silence

Although it is difficult to do, research has shown that using silence in verbal interactions with students encourages longer and higher quality responses. Students must have some time to consider questions beyond the knowledge level. The length of wait time, as it is called in the literature, is short, three to five seconds (but seems long while you're waiting!).

Silence 1: After you have asked a question, wait before identifying a student to respond.
Silence 2: Wait again after identifying a student to respond.
Silence 3: Wait after a student appears to have finished responding. This is the most difficult, but will often result in the student adding to, clarifying, or justifying his/her response.

Reinforcement

Traditional verbal ("right," "good") and nonverbal (e.g., nodding, writing on the board) reinforcements are appropriate when students are beginning with new content in order to encourage effort. But using these all of the time makes the students too dependent on the teacher's assessment.

Recognizing thinking is more appropriate when questions require students to do more than recall or to consider a divergent/ open question. "That was a comprehensive response." "You provided two sources of evidence." "The sequence of reasoning is clear." Such reinforcements can prompt students to pay closer attention to their own thinking.

Using student answers at a later time in the discussion or lesson is a very powerful type of reinforcement, especially if you can identify the student by name. Incorporate the student's response or expand on it in your own comments or summary. Difficult to do, but no one has ever said that the teacher can't take notes during class.

Eliciting

The way a teacher indicates who is to respond is called eliciting and has to do with the sequence of the question and the identification of the student. In the following, T stands for teacher, Q for question, S for student, R for response, N for name, and P for pause (silence or "wait time").

TQ - SR (or multiple SR): Teacher asks question, anyone responds at will or many students respond at once. This sequence can lead to the same students repeatedly responding and/or confusion when several people are talking at once.

N - TQ - SR: How would you like to be on the hot seat? This also lets other students "off the hook" and they may not bother to listen to the question and/or think about a response.

TQ - P - N - P - SR: This is the preferred sequence as it avoids the problems of the first two sequences. If your students are not raising their hands and calling out, just ask them to do so with a simple explanation.

Getting Responses

If students are not responding or only a few do so, try having pairs or trios discuss responses to questions for 30 seconds or so first. You must explain what you are doing and establish a clear stop signal to end group discussion if you do this: "That's a challenging question. Take 30 seconds to discuss it with the person next to you." Look at your watch in an obvious way and at 30 seconds, say "stop" or "time." Or, depending on how animated (or minimal) the discussion is, provide more or less time; lulls tend to be good indicators.

Dr, Kathleen O'Sullivan, Questions & Questions, Orientation to College Teaching, San Fransciso State University, 2003, [http://oct.sfsu.edu/implementation/questions/index.html], April 20, 2011