

The Syllabus: Indicator of Instructional Intentions

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The literature on teaching and learning has improved so much over the years. Researchers are now covering important aspects of both in depth, analyzing with creative designs and exploring for practical and theoretical implications. One case in point is a 2015 syllabus review published in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* (a cross-disciplinary teaching and learning journal that ought to be on everybody's radar).

The article describes four syllabus reviews conducted across five years at the University of West Florida. By syllabus review, we are talking about three reviews of all general education courses and one review of all undergraduate courses offered in a given term. Moreover, these reviews were not casual leaf throughs leading to general impressions. No, the research team developed several rubrics including one that identified institutional expectations about content and another that listed best practices, as in evidence-based strategies. They also put together inventories, one listing 21st-century professional skills. Trained syllabus reviewers used these tools (most of which appear in the article) to systematically analyze course syllabi.



The justification for this kind of review is interesting. Even though there is some agreement among faculty on syllabus content and institutional mandates at most colleges and universities, the course instructor still has significant discretion over what ends up in the syllabus. "Instructors describe their best intentions for the course in a syllabus; the topics they intend to cover, the assignments they expect students to complete, and the strategies they plan to use to evaluate student learning and assign grades or marks" (p. 899). Almost always instructors create syllabi without direct oversight or subsequent evaluation. Borrowing from another source, these authors observe, "Outside of direct observation of classroom interactions, course syllabi are 'unobtrusive but powerful indicators of what takes place in classrooms'" (p. 899).

I will highlight some of what this very thorough review revealed in an upcoming issue of the *Teaching Professor* newsletter. At this point I'm intrigued by a number of issues an analysis like this raises. For example, how standardized should our syllabi be? Rubrics that dictate content could make syllabi look very similar, and in some cases that already happens, such as when there are multiple sections of a course needing curricular consistency. Maybe more standardization would be helpful to students. It must be rather confusing when you're new to college, taking five courses, and the assignments, rules, requirements, content, and format of the syllabi are all different. It's a lot to keep straight. On the other hand, the syllabus can (and usually does) do more than map the geography of the course. It hints at what the instructor believes about students and the kinds of conditions that foster learning, and even bits about the character of the teacher come through. In online environments, written messages like those in the syllabus are what convey the human elements of the course.

Individual faculty aren't positioned to do a review like this, but the tools provided in the article could expedite critical reviews of our syllabi. One interesting finding in this analysis involved the disconnect between the stated learning goals for the course and sets of assignments unlikely to include experiences that would achieve those goals.

More insights about syllabi are likely to result when colleagues share and discuss them. This can happen informally among a few peers in the same department or across them. We could discuss the question of standardization at the departmental level, provided a few brave faculty would share their syllabi for review. The cumulative effects of a set of syllabi (those from courses taken in a semester or from a collection of courses in a major) are not something we talk about, at all or very much.

Isn't it time for us individually, in our departments, within our disciplines, and at our institutions to stop keeping syllabi quite so close to the vest? Yes, I know many disciplinary associations post syllabi collections, but they don't reveal what this review does. Much can be learned about the culture of teaching in our courses, within our departments and at our institutions, from a thorough descriptive analysis of these important artifacts of teaching.

Reference

Reference: Stanny, C., Gonzalez, M., and McGowan, B., (2015). Assessing the culture of teaching and learning through a syllabus review. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40 (7), 898-913.

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