



Sound IDEAs for teaching and learning

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The lowly syllabus: Designing a syllabus that improves learning

In this episode, we explore how a carefully and intentionally designed syllabus might contribute to improved student learning.

Teaser

Student: You know, a lot of the syllabuses, they are, like, just kinda like a bland overview, like, yeah, they do, like, list like what you are going to be doing and stuff, but there's no real, like, interest grabber or, like, a hook or anything.

Student: It's the first thing I see really, you know, and that's the first information I really get about the class before I go in. I don't know. I just think that, you know, if you were to take the time to like, umm, you know, it's kind of like a show of, what's the word for it, right, them caring.

Instructor: I mean, at the end of the day, what we see, you know, is that this document matters. The thing that really matters is designing the course, but if I could just change the document, it also matters.

Instructor: But I've taught for many years, and I finally faced the reality that the students just don't read the syllabus.

From IDEA, this is SoundIDEA

David Pollock: The syllabus is such a common part of a course that it is an afterthought in many cases. Like choosing which nails to use in building a house, the syllabus is part of building a course that is taken for granted and often not given much consideration. But does the syllabus matter? And can giving it attention help build a better course for students? It's the lowly syllabus in this edition of SoundIDEA. I'm David Pollock.

David Pollock: The syllabus was originally just a list of topics to be included in a course but eventually became a standard, required document for all college courses—a document that has grown in purpose, even if not always thoughtfully designed.

Christina Peterson: It seems like the syllabus has expanded over the years to include lots of policy statements, sort of legalese stuff, and they've been getting longer and longer.

David Pollock: Christina Peterson is with the University of Minnesota.

Christina Peterson: Some people think of it as a contract between the instructor and the student that basically says “here’s what I’m going to ask you to do, here’s how well I’m going to ask you to do it, and here’s when you’ll need to do it by.” Some people see it as a tool just to help students stay organized and know what’s going on in class.

David Pollock: In this state-university cafeteria, students seem to agree that a syllabus is a necessary but largely forgettable document.

Student: Rarely have I ever gone to, like, a syllabi that wasn’t standardized. Like, you know, the first part of the syllabus is basically the class description that you could find on, like, when you select new classes, a basic class description. Then, like, you know, office hours, email, tests, and all the standard stuff. None of them ever really, you know, stray too far from that type, make it any different, better or worse. You know what it is.

Student: Most of it is just the same policies, like do not cheat, do not plagiarize, office hours, you know, things like that, so it’s not really that important. The first day of class, this is what we’re going to be talking about, and you never have to, like, you never need to go back to it because it’s just irrelevant at that point.

David Pollock: The students, it seems, describe the syllabus primarily as a tool for keeping on track with assignments and understanding grading.

Student: Basically it’s like a guideline for the class, like what you’re going to be doing for the whole class and how much something is weighted. Like some tests are weighted differently. I know in Lit, my first essay is only worth half of what my last essay is worth, so I know that through the syllabus.

Student: When it comes to the course schedule and the attendance policy and then the grading policies, that’s usually what I look over the most.

Mark Canada: I think of it as similar to an appliance manual. We all know that we're supposed to read it. We all know the important information is there. But we are eager just to get on with it.

David Pollock: Mark Canada is Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Professor of English at Indiana University-Kokomo. He worries that students don't get what they need from our syllabi.

Mark Canada: Almost certainly, a large number if not a majority of them don't get the basic premise that we're setting up, the way we frame the course, almost certainly they don't get the outcomes that we've set up for the course. Maybe they absorb those over the course of the semester, hopefully, but I don't think that they are getting the kind of basic framework we're setting up at the beginning of the course with our high hopes that they are going to see the vision that we have for the course.

David Pollock: And why would they read it, says Peterson.

Christina Peterson: They are multiple pages, they are wordy, there is small text, there's bullet points, there's indentations, and it's not very inviting to read.

David Pollock: So a number of scholars have claimed for years that a well-crafted and well-presented syllabus can make a difference in getting students started off right in a course and, just maybe, be a tool for learning throughout the semester.

Mark Canada: Use the syllabus as an opportunity to frame the kind of learning experience you want your students to have. Draw on all of your knowledge about what works in your course, what your outcomes are, what you want your students to be able to do when that course is over. And then, use the syllabus to get there in the most concise way you can and in the most appealing way you can.

Michael Palmer: We need to do a better job. We—meaning faculty—need to do a better job at helping students understand what this document is and how to use the document, and that this document is no longer just a list of topics and due dates but it's a learning tool—something we continually come back to.

David Pollock: Michael Palmer and his colleagues at the University of Virginia conducted a research project to find if syllabus design makes a difference.

Michael Palmer: I mean, at the end of the day, what we see is, you know, this document matters. The thing that really matters is designing the course, but if I can just change the document, it also matters.

David Pollock: Christina Peterson says that distilling your course into a single clear message—one overriding idea—is one way to make a syllabus more purposeful.

Christina Peterson: It may seem a little odd to think of the syllabus as a message, but really there are lots of messages in the syllabus that get lost with a sea of text. So one of the first suggestions is to create a simple or core message that encapsulates your course. In other words, could you like boil down and distill your entire course into a single message that would be sort of an overriding principle for students and for you for the entire semester.

David Pollock: Coming back to that central message throughout the course helps provide the bigger picture for the course and where individual units fit into that bigger picture. Is the course about explaining why humans behave the way they do, or learning to communicate persuasively so you can get your message across. Whatever your course central message is should be clear in the syllabus, and making that message not only clear but compelling is an important part, says Canada.

Mark Canada: Craft it. Craft an introduction that will engage the students. When I teach a literature course, I compare what we're about to do to a road trip—like a road trip through American literature—and I try to dangle some things in there that they are going to encounter over the course of this semester. In my literature course, we examine Frederick Douglass' narrative, and we read about Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. Those are things that are just naturally engaging so I'll just dangle some of that in front of them and talk about the interesting characters we are going to explore or meet and the wild adventures that they are going to encounter and write it in such a way, I hope, that this sounds like an invitation to a really interesting journey—a road trip that they would want to take.

David Pollock: Including unexpected elements can also catch students' attention, Peterson says. Intentional visual elements, such as graphics and photos, can do the job if you do it effectively.

Christina Peterson: It should support that core message, that simple message that you've created for your course. If it's just a pretty picture or just a piece of clip-art, it may actually detract and look a little cheesy. But if it's a picture that supports that core message, that can really be unexpected and get students' attention. A colleague of mine teaches a pathophysiology course, and what she has for a visual at the top of her syllabus are individual cells in

culture. There is sort of a before and after cell, a normal cell, and then the after is one that has been transformed with a cancer-causing gene that looks extremely different. That sort of sets the tone for her entire course, that patho-physiology means that something different is going on in tissues or in cells.

David Pollock: So in addition to making the syllabus appealing and readable with clear messages, Canada adds that making the course seem relevant is an important way to motivate students from the beginning.

Mark Canada: Frame it up as something that they are going to experience and help them to see what they are going to get out of it. I mean, a simple way to think of it is what's in it for me, and if they are wondering what's in this class for me, then we want to answer that question. And that might be helping them to see how the outcomes that they are going to get out of the class are things that will be really relevant to their careers, to their lives, to their parenting, to their citizenship, to whatever matters to them. And of course that will depend to some degree on the course, but whatever course it is there should be something in there that we think is meaningful and this is our opportunity to frame it up in such a way that we're communicating that it will be useful and relevant to the students who are taking the course.

David Pollock: But does all this effort at designing a syllabus really matter? Does it make a difference? That's one of the questions Michael Palmer and his colleagues attempted to answer.

Michael Palmer: This was our question—does that document matter? Maybe you can have a really well-designed course that is very student centered and the document, the syllabus, that describes that could be a very content centered or policy centered document and, right, it doesn't matter. But what our research showed is that by creating a document that actually reflects the true nature of that learning-centered course, I can positively influence student motivation before they ever set foot in your class. So what that means is that it makes my job easier because they're already kind of bought in to a process; they already think that I'm an approachable instructor. So if I deliver on that promise very early on in the semester, I'm way ahead than if I start with a document that negatively motivates students, if they say "I don't know if I want to take this, this a boring class, I don't think the instructor is going to help me, I think that all we're going to do is lecture," then that instructor has a lot of work to do at the start of the semester to change that if that is, indeed, a learning-focused course. But if I just shift the document, then I've already got the students in the right frame of mind.

David Pollock: Palmer's work at helping faculty re-design syllabi is based around the notion of

moving the document and course from a content-centered one to a learner-focused syllabus and course.

Michael Palmer: So one of the things we encourage instructors to do is to start to frame their courses in terms of big, beautiful questions. Again, that comes from the work of Ken Bain. One of those really meaty questions, those beautiful things, those provocative things that kind of just beg an answer to where a student would read that and say, “Wow, that’s interesting. I might just get something out of this course.” So that’s the description—we have objectives and goals, and then you start to lay out the types of things students would do so that both you as an instructor and the students would know whether we’re getting there. And so those are the assessments, and those assessments are more authentic types of assessments—they are not the hour-long, mid-term tests where there’s maybe a short answer and a multiple choice. But they are project-based things, they are group activities, they are reflective portfolios, they are things that really tie directly to that robust set of objectives that you’ve set out. And then you have a schedule that is not just a list of topics and a list of dates, but that schedule is framed also in those beautiful questions. It’s not that we’re going to study UV spectroscopy in my chemistry class but that we’re going to study why hippopotamuses are pink, right? Or in my Science of Learning class, instead of talking about developmental theories we are going to talk about “Do you think you learn differently than a fourth-grader?” So it really starts to frame that content, the content where, as instructors, we fell in love with the discipline but we often mask that from students so it’s making that content come alive. And the schedule lays out a path for how students can actually navigate through the course.

David Pollock: At the very least, Palmer and others say that making the tone of the syllabus more welcoming to students will affect how they perceive the instructor and the course.

Michael Palmer: Researchers have looked at the tone of the document—simply replacing “the student” with “you” or “we”—and so research into what the power dynamics of those words are and what affect they have on students. The research clearly shows that when you remove that power differential, even through just language and tone, it can have a positive impact on how students perceive the course.

David Pollock: Short of significant course or syllabus re-design, Canada adds that a friendly approach to communicating in the syllabus helps set the stage for effective teaching relationships with students.

Mark Canada: If we take the extra step of trying to craft a syllabus that comes across as coming from a professor who wants them to succeed, then a few little changes in wording can go a long

way. If instead of saying “you will achieve these outcomes,” you can say “I look forward to helping you achieve these outcomes,” little elements like that can go a long way, I think, toward helping to craft the way that the students think of the experience they are about to get and, particularly, how they think about the professor they are about to engage with. Of course, we want them to feel that the professor is approachable and wants them to succeed, and the syllabus is one place where we can convey that message.

David Pollock: Back at the university, what do our students think about putting effort into designing syllabi?

Student: If I were to make an assumption, I would assume that the university sends out one syllabi and all of the professors use it. They just put in their own thing, you know; they just put in their own schedules and contact information and it's, like, one of the pre-made, formatted things on a Word document. You know how you can go to the pre-formatted MLA and you just type in what you need and it will tell you what to put right there. I feel that's what the syllabi are for the university. It's just very repetitive—you are reading the same thing over and over again.

Student: I mean, I've never personally been, like, amazed after I read a syllabus, like, wow, like this is, like, exactly what I'm looking for in a class.

David Pollock: You've never cried after a syllabus?

Student: No, I've never gotten too emotional after reading a syllabus. I mean, I do think it's a good idea, like, they definitely should be, like, I feel that it would help a lot more, like, kids, like get, like, eventually prepared for the class and be like, okay, I'm really interested and I'm, like, ready to learn this stuff. But a lot of syllabuses, I mean, right now just don't do that enough.

Student: Like every syllabus that I've, like, encountered really has had, like, the kind of standard thing. I haven't seen anyone, like, organically make a syllabus like by their own. And I think, to me, that's kind of, I'm not going to say it's a show of laziness on their part, I know that they have lives, they obviously have, you know, things that they need to do. But if you were to talk about it in terms of, like, you know, syllabi, in terms of, like, me being, like, engaged, it's the first thing I see really, you know. And that's the first information I really get about the class before I go in. I don't know. I just, I think that if you were to take the time to, like, it's kind of like a show of, umm, what's the word for it, right, of them caring. You know, they take, they put a little bit more time into these sort of things.

Student: Well, I don't really agree with that just because I feel like they have more important

stuff to work on than the syllabus. Like, I think they are here to teach us and, like, putting more effort into the syllabus doesn't really make sense, especially when kids really aren't going to look at it so it's just a waste of their time.

David Pollock: You may also be dubious about the value of putting effort into syllabus design, but it seems clear that one of the biggest benefits is the course design issues that a professor confronts when doing so—particularly if taking a full-blown approach to re-designing a course as Michael Palmer and his colleagues at UVA suggest. You can find a link to their work in the resources section on this podcast page. But even little changes such as editing for tone or for friendliness, crafting a central message, and making the syllabus more readable with visual elements can apparently help. You can see some examples and other resources on this podcast page.

David Pollock: So what do you think? Is it worth the time to create a syllabus that is more student-focused? Are there better ways to communicate course policies? How do you get students to read the syllabus? Is the syllabus equally important in on-line and face-to-face classes? We'd love to hear your thoughts and especially your suggestions for creating syllabi and using them effectively in a course. Submit your comments on this podcast page so others can benefit from your experience. Or send an email to our SoundIDEA address.

For IDEA, this is David Pollock.