Functions of a Syllabus: A Critique

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**Introduction**

A class syllabus is a critical element of a course, but often is overlooked in curricular and/or course design (Eberly, Newton, & Wiggins, 2001). According to Eberly et al. (2001), a “syllabus is often the initial communication tool that students receive as well as being the most formal mechanism for sharing information with students regarding any course.” Syllabi tend to be inherited from previous years and previous professors, regardless of any curricular or course changes (Eberly et al., 2001). Despite this lack of time and effort usually used in creating a syllabus, it still serves as a marketing tool for educational institutions (Nelson, 2010), an organizational structure for the course, a legal contract between the students and the university, and a learning tool to produce successful learners (Eberly et al., 2001).

**Marketing Tool**

A syllabus can act as a marketing tool for education institutions, because students can determine quickly if they want to take the course (Nelson, 2010). Three marketing factors that influence whether students take certain courses: reputation of the faculty member teaching the course, description of the course, and whether the course fulfills part of the student’s requirements to graduate. With these influencing factors in mind, often, if not always educational institutions require faculty contact information, course description, and any prerequisite or corequisite classes needed for the class (The University of Alabama, n.d.).

The overall tone of the syllabus also can foreshadow the tone of the class. A highly organized and detailed syllabus usually denotes highly organized and detailed class with clear, high expectations; on the other hand, a vague, ambiguous, and disorganized syllabus can indicate a vague, ambiguous, and disorganized class (Eberly et al., 2001). This tone in a syllabus can assist students in determining if the actual course will match their expectations of the course.

In the Chemistry 117 course syllabus (2009), the faculty contact did include the instructor’s name, office hours, contact number, email, and office and class location; however, the phone number was incomplete, and the whole content of faculty contact would be more visually appealing in a table format. Contact information was located in one area making it easy to find. The course description, “an expanded version of the course description in the college catalogue” (Syllabus development, n.d.), has many course elements: name and number of the course, number of credit hours, catalogue course description and purpose, and any prerequisite or corequisite courses (The University of Alabama, n.d.). The Chemistry 117 course syllabus (2009) does include these elements, but does not include the chemistry laboratory and the recitation as corequisites, where two of his methods of evaluation are obtained. Also, these elements should be grouped together to provide coherent organization, and the heading should be altered to create an easier visual for students to navigate. Grammatical and typographical errors are riddled throughout the course description, giving the impression that either the professor is uneducated or does not care about his quality of work.

**Organizational Structure**

By including the components of course outline, course calendar, and course objectives, the syllabus provides an organizational structure for the course (Eberly et al., 2001). Having a clear organizational structure within the syllabus assists teachers in evaluating course content, scheduling, and course objectives and provides security for students by giving them an understanding what course goals and expectations will be (Eberly et al., 2001; Nelson, 2010).

In the current syllabus for Chemistry 117 (2009), the organizational structure of the course is absent. A haphazard attempt at a course schedule was made but consisted mostly of the institution’s calendar, which outlines holidays, midterm grades received, and drop/withdrawal dates. A detailed course outline with objectives would give students a clear idea of the direction where the course is headed (Eberly et al., 2001). Furthermore, a course schedule that delineates when all graded items are due can help students prepare adequately for class. These elements are vital to include in any syllabus, and a great deal of thought and planning should be used when creating these elements.

**Legal Contract**

According to Bers, Davis, and Taylor (1996), course syllabi can be used as legal documents to determine outcomes of judicious grievances and to establish equivalency credit for students transferring from another educational institution. Because the course syllabus can be used in these ways, it is a legal contract between students and the educational institution (Bers et al., 1996). A course syllabus should clearly state course and institutional policies, for example attendance, disability, academic integrity, student support, grading, and methods of evaluation policies. Although the Chemistry 117 course syllabus (2009) contains some content on attendance, disability, academic integrity, student support, and grading policies, the disorganization and uncaring tone does not create a positive legal contract or promote usefulness of these policies. To improve the syllabus, the policies should be grouped together, not scattered throughout the document. Attendance should be clearly delineated for class, lab, and recitation; currently, the syllabus (Chemistry 117 course syllabus, 2009) sarcastically encourages attendance by reciting amateur research and the undergraduate catalogue. Although the course syllabus did include contact information for the Office of Disability Services, the disability accommodation statement should be more positive and inviting to encourage students who need accommodations to contact him (Syllabus development, n.d.; The University of Alabama, n.d.). To complete Dr. Al’s academic integrity policy, academic misconduct, plagiarism, and cheating should be unmistakably defined (Syllabus development, n.d.). Ambiguous or vague definitions in a syllabus can be the reason an educational institution can lose a lawsuit (Rasche & Stone, 2005). Student support services, such as learning skills center, review sessions, and office hours, are noted in Chemistry 117 course syllabus (2009); however, other beneficial resources, such as library services, tutoring, open lab hours, computer lab hours, and online resources and services (Syllabus development, n.d.), were missing. In addition to missing student support services, the tone was less than enthusiastic, readability was difficult due to vague terms, organization was missing as components were scattered throughout the syllabus, and visual appeal was absent by grammatical and typographical errors and no clear outline of the material (Chemistry 117 course syllabus, 2009). The last and important policies deal with grading and evaluation. A syllabus should include all methods of evaluation (ie. exams, projects, class participation), specify grading scale, and “overall criteria for assigning a course grade including percentages for course assignments and tests” (Syllabus development, n.d.). The Chemistry 117 course syllabus (2009), did describe the grading scale, course grades, and some information on the methods of evaluation, but locating the content was difficult. Visually, the course grades and grading scale could be improved by placing the information in a table format. Unfortunately, the last line of the grading scale, “+/-‘s will be given at the instructor’s discretion” (Chemistry 117 course syllabus, 2009), indicates favoritism and could be possible fodder for legal action against the professor. The makeup and exam policies were confusing and verbose, contained numerous grammatical and typographical errors, and the tone and language were threatening and too informal.

**Learning Tool**

A syllabus can be used as a learning tool for both professors who create it and the students that receive it (Eberly et al., 2001). For professors, the syllabus is the “first opportunity to introduce the learning-centered paradigm to ... [the] students and to describe for them the role and responsibilities they will have in … class” (Diamond, 1997). This underused and often forgotten function of a course syllabus can greatly improve active learning and student retention and success (Eberly et al., 2001). A syllabus can also help evaluate a course to improve the overall curriculum (Nelson, 2010). Elements of a syllabus that can enhance learning include course objectives; methods stated for accomplishment; teaching/learning strategies; textbook, software, or other resources used; and methods of evaluation (Eberly et al., 2001). According to Iwasiw, Goldenberg, and Andrusyszyn (2008), course objectives describe what the students will be able to think, do, and act when they finish the course. Thus learners will know the final outcomes or purpose of the class from course objectives and methods of evaluation. When learners know this information, they become more motivated and active in their learning process (Kirkpatrick, 2010). The other components, methods stated for accomplishment, teaching/learning strategies, and resources used, equip the students with tools they need to learn and to succeed in the course (Eberly et al., 2001).

In order for the syllabus to be used as a learning tool, learning resources should be built into it. The Chemistry 117 course syllabus (2009) made no mention of how to be successful in the class – besides a vague and threatening reference to avoid missing class – or any teaching/learning strategies. Building these elements into the syllabus can promote an active learning environment. The mention of textbooks and web resource for homework assignments were difficult to find and did not provide a professional format (using APA format can reduce the student’s confusion on which books to buy). Because the course objectives were missing, knowing how exams and homework will contribute to their knowledge is absent (Chemistry 117 course syllabus, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Because the syllabus can be used for so many functions, a well written and organized syllabus is vital. The Chemistry 117 course syllabus (2009), an example of poorly thought out and poorly executed work, overall was disorganized, condescending and uncaring in tone, contained poor readability due to grammatical and typographical errors, and visually unappealing without appropriate headers, formatting, and other visual cues. The most disappointing aspect was the professor’s missed opportunity to motivate his students and enhance their learning experience through his syllabus. When creating a syllabus, all professors must keep all its functions in mind, but especially promoting the teaching/learning environment.

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