

The Online Syllabus

A Means of Communication to Enhance Student Success

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The syllabus has consistently provided educators and students with a foundation for their courses. The change in higher education brought on by COVID-19 highlights many necessary changes in the syllabus to communicate more effectively between educators and students. The syllabus becomes a valuable communication tool for educators transitioning from a simple course outline to including guidance on contacting the educator and course expectations regarding attendance, netiquette, and assignments. Assisting current and future educators in understanding and effectively using the syllabus to enhance their courses will also be explored.

Keywords: syllabus, communication, online learning, student success

Understanding the history of the syllabus and its evolution over time is essential to appreciate its role in education fully. Although the deliv-

ery of the course materials may vary between synchronous and asynchronous classes, the syllabus' purpose and value remain constant. Educators utilize the syl-



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labus for more than just providing a course schedule; it also communicates expectations and requirements, enhancing student success.

HISTORY OF THE SYLLABUS: SYNCHRONOUS VERSUS ASYNCHRONOUS

The notion of distance learning is not a new idea; for centuries, education was delivered via distance learning utilizing mail, radio, and television (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). The necessity for distance learning arose from an awareness that learning opportunities were not readily available to all individuals; therefore, concepts like correspondence programs emerged (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Distance learning has become synonymous with online learning due to most individuals' accessibility to the internet (Alalshaikh, 2015) and the cultural acceptance of technology in everyday life. In current academia, the delivery of education materials is conveyed via in-person instruction, online instruction, or a combi-

nation of in-person and distance instruction, referred to as hybrid instruction (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). In contrast to in-person learning, online learning engages students by providing education and learning material through asynchronous and synchronous modalities. Asynchronous instruction does not occur in real-time between the educator and student(s); it hails from the original distance learning formula of the past, like, correspondence education (Roseth et al., 2013). Asynchronous learning facilitates educator-student and student-student communication without requiring both parties to engage simultaneously, for example, on discussion boards (Gonzalez, 2009).

Traditional in-person learning is challenging to expand across large distances, allowing little variability for student needs and backgrounds. Synchronous instruction, however, does occur in real-time via technology through videoconferencing, allowing communication to occur live for all parties involved across distances (Roseth et al., 2013). Conversely, online learning allows education to reach many students with diverse needs and backgrounds, creating broad access to many students and culminating in a multicultural, diverse classroom and learning experience for students. A 2020 study conducted prepandemic found that more than half of students (52%) stated that if their school did not offer their program online, they would find it elsewhere rather than enrolling in a traditional on-campus program (Hanson, 2021). In addition, many students live in areas where commuting to an accredited program is impossible. In these instances, offering nontraditional modes of communication (i.e., virtual office hours versus in-person office hours, phone numbers, email address) is crucial because of the student's limited access to the educator.

How distance learners access course content, including the syllabus, is essential to consider. Before the pandemic, 38 per-



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cent of students said they accessed course content on a mobile device (i.e., phone, tablet) (Hanson, 2020). Educators must ensure that course content is compatible with various devices, especially when teaching distance learners. Including resources such as troubleshooting videos, IT contact information, and how-to guides enhances the learning experience. With the increase in online learning programs comes the challenge for teachers to evolve and reinvent teaching resources, beginning with the syllabus, to match the evolving student profile.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SYLLABUS

Educators have used the course syllabus for quite some time, and historically, it briefly outlined the course (Cullen & Harris, 2009). However, the intention of the syllabus has evolved to accommodate modern learning objectives and include adding more elements to the more traditional syllabus. One such evolutionary practice is shifting focus from pedagogical, instruction-focused syllabi to learning-focused ones (Cullen & Harris, 2009). This shift can be described as prioritizing *what* the learner gains or learns from the course. Processes of the learning experience and explanations of learning outcomes are included in a learning-focused syllabus. Here, the syllabus is more than a document perused at the beginning of the course; instead, the syllabus exists as a guide utilized consistently throughout the course.

Attention to these additional elements, such as contact information, goals, expectations, instructions on using online platforms, welcome messages, and the like, makes the syllabus a requirement for online courses and distance modalities. Cullen and Harris (2009) describe an approach for organizing the syllabus, which involves focusing on three different categories: community, power and control, and evaluation and assessment, while

Merrill (2020) suggests organizing the syllabus for three other purposes, specifically a contract, a permanent record, and a learning tool. Cullen and Harris (2009) indicate including traditional sections of the syllabus, which focus on evaluation and assessment, and additional sections to accommodate current learning modalities (to empower the student to understand expectations and learning outcomes). Merrill discusses the traditional purposes of the syllabus, serving as a contract and a record, but elaborates on the modern meaning of the syllabus to exist as a learning tool.

Cullen and Harris (2009) and Merrill (2020) emphasize the importance of the educator's syllabus in explaining the goal of instruction to encourage student understanding and involvement in their learning. This general concept helps bolster the learning process for students to be proactive and invested in their learning to be proactive and invested in their education and accountable by returning power in education to the student versus traditional pedagogical instruction. Mehrotra (2021) offers an example of successful online learning, describing how the unanticipated circumstances of COVID-19 affected the learning environment. Instead of negatively impacting the learning experience, the COVID-19 adjustments created an opportunity for effective collaboration and problem-solving between educator and student, thus dissolving hierarchy and bolstering transparency and empathy. This example provides an argument for the importance of community in the classroom. The syllabus of an online course needs to provide opportunities for building community (educator-student community, student-student community), compared to opportunities for community offered in brick-and-mortar classrooms. This circumstance provided a unique opportunity for building community between the educator and the students.

Including opportunities for students to feel part of a community in the syllabus is essential in any course. Community allows students to learn from one another instead of solely from the educator (Cullen & Harris, 2009). Additionally, the syllabus of an online course should consider the distance barrier of an online classroom and provide resources for students to connect and interact with one another throughout the course.

CHANGES IN THE ONLINE STUDENT PROFILE

Distance learning is rooted in the 1700s (Harting & Erthal, 2005); however, a significant increase in students in Title IV degree institutions participating in distance education classes was seen recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The onset of COVID-19 in 2020 prompted a transition to online learning for primary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate students. This transition to the online education format brought increased use of technology and a need for online educators to effectively use and assist students in operating the various online platforms and associated features.

The onset of COVID-19 resulted in a massive transition to online learning, validating online learning as a credible education modality and encouraging the exploration of necessary elements to use the platform as a complete, comprehensive learning experience instead of a temporary substitution for in-person learning. The online learner profile expanded to include preschool children, school-aged children (elementary, middle school, and high school), undergraduate students, and graduate students. With this, the need to increase communication with students regarding course expectations on all levels is crucial. Meeting the students' needs through student engagement, classroom structure, and open (two-way) communi-

cation between educator and student while creating a sense of community became essential (Kuh et al., 2013; National Education Association, 2015; Seidman, 2012). While the instruction methods following the removal of COVID-related restrictions and protocols may result in the return to in-person or hybrid classrooms, the valuable lessons learned about the communication opportunities within the syllabus have been recognized as it provides an underpinning for the course regardless of setting. Such communication options are more critical than ever with our recent awareness of the ever-present potential for change, expected or unanticipated, within the educational forum. The profile of students will continue to change over time, and the syllabus will provide a strong communication foundation to build future courses.

UNDERSTANDING TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

When one thinks about the required proficiencies of an educator, one may initially assert a teacher's need for mastery and understanding of the subject matter they will be teaching. Bancotovska (2015) describes the teacher's capabilities as being separated into pedagogical competencies, or understanding of the subject matter taught, and professional skills beyond general and subject knowledge, like technology in the classroom. Modern education continues to incorporate increasing amounts of technology in the learning process due to the expansion of learning opportunities offered by technology and the recognition of the vast technological presence in the students' impending careers following their education.

Francois van As (2018) observed that, in many cases, while educators were provided impressive technology for classroom use, teachers were expected to utilize the technology without proper training. The author proposed the necessity of continu-

ing professional development for the teachers to optimize the present technology. Educators no longer just taught the lesson plan but also instructed students on the use of technology, appropriate netiquette (or internet etiquette), and effective use of the new platform to connect with and communicate with class members. As COVID-19 shut down more schools and businesses, continuing education offerings increased course offerings via technology. Educators who needed help learning the various platforms found this help through professional organizations and workplaces, often at no cost; however, this also highlights the necessity to increase continuing education courses available for educators due to the limited catalog currently in existence. The development of training programs continues to be a tool educators can advocate for from employers, institutions, credentialing bodies, and continuing education organizations. These organizations include the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training, Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, Higher Learning Commission, the Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Accreditation Commission Council on Occupational Education, and Distance Education Accrediting Commission as well as regional accrediting commissions.

Educators need to consider technology in the classroom from a bilateral approach; not only does the educator need to be able to use the technology, but they also must be proficient in assisting students in its use. Educators must effectively use classroom technology from the course's inception through final grades while purposely utilizing available mechanisms to enhance student learning experiences (Singh, 2021). The educator's responsibility to balance their knowledge of technology and assist their students in its use is another area in

the syllabus that can be of assistance. The syllabus supports student exploration and competency development by providing students with links to the technology before class and encouraging them to practice it outside of the classroom.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR TECHNOLOGY

The effectiveness of technology in online classrooms begins with the institution and its commitment to providing a user-friendly platform for instructors to create a thriving learning environment and for students to explore their educational experiences. Choosing a high-quality platform for use falls on administrators such as provost, academic affairs officers, and deans, and program directors, who are then responsible for becoming familiar with classroom technology. Their expertise in the online platform leads to the development of empathy for the experiences of educators and students. The administrators' understanding and insights into the classroom platform increase advocacy efforts for instructors and learners.

Institutional technology (IT) staff members are an essential resource for faculty and students. Institutions need to highlight the IT department members' inherent value in enhancing students' learning experience and assisting in troubleshooting technological glitches that may occur. Incorporating these technology experts into the online classroom via IT contact buttons or email addresses increases the likelihood of students reaching out to them for support and assistance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EDUCATOR

The beginning of a new course is often a daunting experience for students. A successful educator may seek opportunities to ease a student's apprehensions and encourage success. Especially in an online setting, a well-constructed syllabus may

relieve the worrisome student (Kogar, 2021). The syllabus provides the student with their first introduction to the technology of the course, including the platform used for classes, be it Blackboard, Canvas, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or others used by the institution, and the directions to and process of submission of assignments, via, email, Box, Blackboard, or similar means.

Providing students with clear directions about the platform for the class (i.e., Zoom, Collaborate, or Teams) allows the student to understand the expectations and utilize the system before the first class, thereby increasing comfort and familiarity. In addition, educators may include links to the class platform and troubleshooting resources, such as trying a different browser or contacting the institutional IT department, in the syllabus to enhance the student's introduction. Other helpful information to consider may include relevant information in the form of organization charts for assistance with technological issues and links to resources such as videos of how to upload assignments or review instructor feedback. This information may be included in the course system, allowing for an introduction and opportunities to practice using the system before the first class. However, some students may struggle to access the course materials via the LMS system. Consideration for new students may result in the educator emailing the syllabus to students before the first class.

UNDERSTANDING ONLINE EDUCATION

Colleges and universities noticed the increase in the usefulness of the syllabus for student success during the COVID-19 pandemic as they witnessed the syllabus evolve into a valuable tool for communicating pertinent course information in the online environment. The traditional syllabus should serve the needs of educators and students. Still, current events of social

distancing in response to the pandemic made educators aware of the importance of creativity in the classroom and the need to consider new options in meeting student needs to ensure learner success through modifications and additions to the syllabus. COVID-19's grip on the globe emphasizes this importance as students and schools transition back to traditional brick-and-mortar learning and acknowledge that education likely will never fully transition back to the standard educational delivery systems before COVID-19 when that transition occurs is unclear. On a massive scale, the unexpected necessity of online education had positive results, validating online education and legitimizing the distance learning modality as noninferior. It will continue to provide a valuable means of education moving forward. A similar evolution occurred with syllabi following the COVID-19 pandemic, with the awareness that syllabi are the backbone of each course, supporting success for the educator and student, regardless of teaching format, as explored below. This information is valuable for all instructional forms, including in-person, hybrid, and distance learning, displaying a beneficial outcome of the unexpected and jarring shift to online education.

WHAT IS THE SYLLABUS?

The syllabus is an essential document, typically considered a transparent summary of what students will accomplish throughout the course (Germano & Nicholls, 2020). Generally, it is students' first contact with the educator and the course's content. Some describe the syllabus as a contract, permanent record, and learning tool (Caughlin, 2014; Stanny et al., 2014). Syllabi leave some students filled with dread, while others excitedly highlight critical due dates and materials in multiple colors. This diversity in student responses to syllabi is just one example of educators' challenge to

create a document that will accommodate all learning styles.

Professional educators use their syllabi to share their passion for course content and communicate their hope that the student will succeed. Inclusion of the educator's passion for teaching into the syllabus may be necessary communication to convey excitement and ignite collaboration for learning from the student. Educators accomplish this through an introductory paragraph. The educator briefly discusses why the educator enjoys teaching the class, the importance of the subject matter to the field, or a prerecorded introduction in the course shell before the first class, which provides an overview. In doing so, students may begin the course more motivated, excited about learning (Harrington et al., 2018), and more determined to retain information.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE EDUCATION

Through the syllabus, educators can communicate their teaching philosophy and personality to the students regardless of the platform; however, this is particularly significant in online learning (Caughlin, 2014; Stanny et al., 2014). Online courses add complexity to the learning process in that educators and students are not physically in the same place, at the same time, or even in the same time zone. Even in synchronous online classes, the definitive physical gap potentially creates educator-student and student-student miscommunications, leading to confusion. Educators should provide a syllabus that allows students to reference detailed information throughout the course (Roberts, 2019).

Educators may include a short biography in the syllabus to assist students in feeling a more personal connection to the faculty, along with a clear statement regarding how to access the educator to promote the educational relationship.

Including office hours to meet increases accessibility to the educator for students. Educators offering video conferences for online courses and availability to the students outside of class is crucial. It provides a viable substitution for the personal interactions that may occur before or after class in a brick-and-mortar classroom.

If students have questions concerning assignments, the syllabus aims to increase student confidence while decreasing tension and stress by clarifying assignments and class procedures. Students who habitually consult the syllabus become more responsible and involved in their learning process, relieving some pressure off educators with busy schedules and limited time. Autonomy and initiative refer to students being in control and independent in their education. Students can develop these nondidactic skills and use them successfully in their future careers.

Creativity in delivering the syllabus enhances student understanding of the material it contains. Harrington et al. (2018) suggest adding an audio or video element to the syllabus, allowing students to experience the educator's tone, affect, and facial expressions. A visual aspect is crucial in online classes because nonverbal communication, which is limited, helps individuals determine if messages are accurately received (Harrington et al., 2018). A video can act as an icebreaker, breaking students' tension from first-day jitters, and it also expresses how invested the educator is in the course.

One of the most discouraging things a student can encounter is an educator disengaged from the course content and their peers. Regardless of the educator's teaching skills or knowledge of course content, little learning happens if they cannot capture students' attention. When an educator introduces and encourages a sense of community, the learning experiences become more meaningful. The students stay connected to the educator and each other

throughout the course with more open communication (Mitchell-Holder, 2016).

Some education programs assign one instructor as a subject matter expert for each course. The subject matter expert serves as a course coordinator, developing the class shell in compliance with institutional expectations and providing clear expectations of assignments and assessments for the course. No matter the instructor, all students are held to the same standards. The subject matter expert is responsible for choosing required textbooks, supplemental materials, and updating the core syllabus to include the course expectations, mission statement, and other elements to provide a uniform foundation across all course sections each semester. Assignments and their related rubrics are consistent across all sections, ensuring the student performance expectations and consistent grading procedures by faculty. Effective syllabus development allows for efficient communication of expectations to students and all instructors, providing consistent interrelatedness among all course sections.

MEANS TO INCREASE ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE STUDENT

Whether explicit or implicit, the syllabus's initial purpose is to act as a contract between educator and student (Parkes & Harris, 2002); however, it is not a legal contract as there is room for revisions and negotiations. Online learners are often adults with families and careers. Subsequently, the educator may acknowledge their students' busy schedules and allow flexible due dates. However, when students decide to study through an online education program, they accept responsibility for learning the content and believe they can succeed (Roberts, 2019). Therefore, the syllabus must clearly state student and educator expectations, responsibilities, procedures, and class policies. Communicating requirements and expectations

clearly and in writing allows students to make informed decisions about taking the class and plan effectively to accomplish assignments and check performance (Parkes & Harris, 2002). Sulik and Keys (2013) note that applying policies consistently and having clear expectations fosters understanding and fairness, reducing complaints and grievances. The syllabus provides the educators and students a reference upon which to root accountability for the course.

Through the syllabus, educators help students improve the skills required in today's workforce (Sulik & Keys, 2013). Sulik and Keys suggest specifically addressing student accountability in the syllabus. For example, "students who produce 'A' work ... take responsibility for their education by claiming—not receiving—knowledge" (p. 155) and "let me be upfront ... this course demands a sense of responsibility ... expected of college students who are very serious about the learning process" (Sulik & Keys, 2013, p. 155). Consistently using the syllabus as a course tool, students learn and practice crucial life skills such as meeting deadlines, attention to detail, and organization.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENT TO INCLUDE UNIQUE TO ONLINE

The syllabus is an essential document providing a basic outline of the course and typically includes a schedule of topics, readings, activities, and assignments (Ko & Rosen, 2017; Luke et al., 2012). Other elements included are course goals, objectives, expected outcomes, policies, procedures, evaluation measures, course requirements, and attendance and participation requirements (Ko & Rosen, 2017; Stanny et al., 2014; Sulik & Keys, 2013). When well written, goals and objectives inform students about class expectations, what they learned, and how teachers assess learning. Many people see goals and objectives as the same thing; however,

both serve a specific purpose and are quite different. Goals are broad and generally intended to let students know the “target” of the class. For example, students will gain a deeper understanding of counseling theories and how to use them effectively. The statement is broad but loosely defines what students will learn.

In contrast, objectives are more specific, measurable, observable, and short term. The objective shows the student how to reach the goal. When writing objectives, the educator should consider the audience (whom the objective is for), behavior (what the educator wants the student to do), condition (under what circumstances should the educator see the behavior), and degree (what is the acceptable level of performance). For example, students [the audience] will present [degree] a scholarly research project examining the effectiveness of current theoretical models and treatment strategies as it applies to specific populations [behavior] during class [condition].

Sulik and Keys (2013) suggest including the following foundational elements as well; the mission statement, course descriptions, required textbooks (including ISBN), the method of instruction, specifying how and where the class will take place, contact information for the educator with a specification of time zones, and confidentiality clause(s). Including detailed explanations of assignments, specific dates for deadlines (including exact dates and times with time zone) and providing detailed contact information and office hours is essential because it helps eliminate student excuses and increases responsibility. Often online learners reside in multiple time zones; therefore, the educator needs to specify their office hours so students do not unknowingly call during busy parts of the day or after hours. More details specific to meeting platforms and security are critical to include in the syllabus. Online classes often include students at various stages, ages, and abilities. Comfortability

concerning technology is something educators should consider. While it is necessary to become comfortable with all technology required, it is helpful for the educator to review how to operate and find help using the required platforms. A well-written, highly effective syllabus is very detailed and leaves no room for misinterpretations of how grades are assigned.

LIABILITY COVERAGE FOR EDUCATORS

The syllabus, as previously noted, provides a structure to the course for the educator and the student, serving as a manual for the student’s ultimate success. However, educators must prepare for the potential of student conflict should success not occur and the resulting examination of the syllabus’s role. The syllabus is not a contract, nor is it viewed as one by the courts (Rumore, 2016). It does provide the educator with a record of a straightforward document, including all course expectations, assignments, rubrics, and due dates, to name a few. It ultimately serves as the educator’s evidence of good communication of expectations.

Student appeals may be granted and justified based on unclear expectations or explanations supplied in a course syllabus (Stanny et al., 2015); therefore, clear communication should be a primary objective of an educator in syllabus development. An example of a safeguard to include in a syllabus is a disclaimer statement; here, the educator informs the student that aspects of the course, such as due dates or the course schedule, may change throughout the semester due to “extraordinary circumstances” is a strongly suggested addition to any syllabus (Rumore, 2016, p. 4; Mikolon & Murphy, 2022). The disclaimer allows the flexibility necessary for a productive learning experience with security from scrutiny. It allows for changes that benefit both the student and the educator (Mikolon & Murphy, 2022). Instances often arise beyond the educator’s control and may

require the syllabus to be adapted during the semester. For example, timelines may need adjusting if a natural disaster affects most students or the university. Alternatively, an educator teaching a class for the first time may find an assignment too tricky or unmeaningful and decide to drop or change the assignment. When considering changes to the syllabus, educators should first determine if the assignment in question is essential to the course goals and outcomes. Next, students should be informed of the change immediately and provide a rationale. Finally, educators must document any syllabus changes in writing, including the date the change was made and posted where students will see it, along with a confirmation from students that the change was viewed and understood. Again, this disclaimer statement allows the educator to anticipate inevitable and unforeseen circumstances, empowering the educator to make flexible changes to the course to ensure the student receives the educational outcomes desired.

SUMMARY

While the application and acceptance of online learning have been occurring over time, COVID-19's impact on education is widespread and significant, causing many educators to adjust their perceptions and practices of education, including sharing course information and materials. COVID-19 legitimized online learning for meeting educational requirements and needs; it also increased awareness of the evolution of the student profile, further supporting the trend of online education becoming a preference as a learning modality. This adjustment in education resulted in recognizing the value of online learning and the importance of disseminating information via effective communication. The syllabus lent itself as a suitable means of achieving the goal of effective communication, and the education community is continually investigating ways to utilize the syllabus

successfully. Often acting as a student's first impression of the course content, workload, and educator, the syllabus should be informative, engaging, and posted in multiple places. The syllabus allows educators to give students pertinent information and communicate course expectations while providing a foundational reference for the course and a recipe for student success. Understandably, with the increase in the use of online education came the rise in technology use. Subsequently, the need for technological understanding became imperative for educators. This paper outlined constructive and beneficial tips for constructing an exceptional syllabus; however, educators still face the challenge of improving the online syllabus. The goal is to justify online education's right to remain a respected and credible learning modality. COVID-19 has proved that you cannot plan for everything, regardless of how hard you try. Regardless of the challenge, supporting student success and creating a sense of connection and community is paramount. Technological understanding became imperative for educators. This paper outlined constructive and beneficial tips for constructing an exceptional syllabus; however, educators still face the challenge of improving the online syllabus. The goal is to justify online education's right to remain a respected and credible learning modality. COVID-19 has proved that you cannot plan for everything, regardless of how hard you try. Regardless of the challenge, supporting student success and creating a sense of connection and community is paramount.

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