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Journal of Management Education 2014 38: 724 originally published online 18
October 2013
DOI: 10.1177/1052562913504764

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The 21st-Century Syllabus: Tips for Putting Andragogy Into Practice

Kathy Lund Dean[1] and Charles J. Fornaciari[2]

Abstract

In our previous article about reconceptualizing the course syllabus, we argued that instructors must move syllabi beyond their traditional pedagogically-inspired focus on operational course norms if the syllabus is to remain relevant as a teaching and learning tool. Here, we take the andragogical ideas developed in the prior article and provide educators with seven practical and concrete tips for syllabus development efforts that are more consistent with co-learning communities and shared learning outcomes.

Introduction

In our prior article (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, this issue), we argued that despite the enormous amount of instructional innovation in recent years, course syllabus development principles continue to reflect an increasingly outdated pedagogical perspective. Given its centrality to course success, it is ironic that the syllabus is often viewed as an instructor-protecting defensive tool (J. M. Beggs, 2002, *Defensive syllabi*, personal conversation with author)

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with a strong emphasis on developing it as a contract and power instrument. Thus, it is unsurprising that the syllabus construction guidance literature typically focuses on issues like clarity and completeness (Filene, 2005; Lieberg, 2008; Richlin, 2006) at the expense of critically important issues like communication, signaling, and collaborative learning.

Part of the solution for moving the syllabus into the 21st century is to design it using andragogy-inspired insights (Knowles, 1977; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). As we move toward a process informed by andragogical principles, we believe that the communication and signaling aspects of syllabus construction need attention. In this follow-on article, we offer readers seven concrete and practical tips to help them develop their own andragogically-inspired syllabi. We expect that instructors could adapt some, or all, of these tips in unique and interesting ways to best suit their own teaching styles and student learning objectives. These clearly are not "all or nothing" suggestions, but rather generalized "starting point" practical guidelines that provide a frame in which to consider how closely syllabus construction and content matches one's teaching and learning objectives (Beatty, Leigh, & Lund Dean, 2009).

Consider Moving Toward Inclusive Syllabus Language and Policies, Signaling Mutual Respect

Perhaps the first, and most important, step is for instructors to consider moving toward more *authentically* inclusive language and policy construction. A key andragogical principle involves moving away from a subject–object orientation. Incorporating genuinely "we" language (Thompson, 2007) denotes liminal spaces of shared policy-crafting. Baecker (1998) warns of the false "we" that in reality means "you." Research also suggests that we also need to monitor a tendency toward using inclusion "weasel words" (Lutz, n.d.; Wasserman & Hausrath, 2005), or, words that sound inclusive but in reality ambiguously disguise the truth of continued instructor power norms. For example, "Let's make sure your writing is free from mechanics and sentence construction errors" sounds inclusive and shared, but in reality means students must submit assignments that conform to some a priori writing guidelines. The "let's" denotes a false collaboration between instructor and student—the instructor is most likely not heading to the library to co-produce writing assignments. In revising syllabus policies and language, where is *real* power or control being shared?

Another component could be to incorporate aspirational or visioning types of material on the syllabus, such as "what we hope to achieve in this course."

This would move beyond "objectives–outcomes" and include conversations about why this class is important, where it fits into the student's educational processes, who is responsible for what aspects of course outcomes, and what skill sets the student might hope to take away.

Consider Streamlining Syllabi to Recognize Reading Habits of Today's Students

As we previously noted, one of the clearest andragogically-based trends is the shift toward shorter and more flexibly constructed documents. Instructors should recognize and account for the reading habits of today's Generation Y students who live in a fragmented and short–attention span world. Text messages, "tweets," online chats, and an increasing aversion to e-mail (Foehr, 2006; Richtel, 2010; Tapscott, 2009) mark their communication norms.

These norms all indicate a need to write syllabi that are clear, direct, and succinct. Doing so gives them a realistic chance of rising above the din of students' lives and being used as a resource. Consequently, teachers may want to offload assignment descriptions and any unnecessary detail from syllabi in an effort to shorten them. Many mobile devices have data limits, so students prefer smaller files. Crafting separate assignment files and documents reminds students of each discrete assignment, helping them plan their workload more effectively by chunking information into manageable lengths (Lund Dean & Fornaciari, 2013). Between course schedules, learning outcomes, basic instructor information, and other required university information, it is often tough to get a syllabus down to fewer than five pages. Paring down the syllabus makes sense considering what syllabus information students typically consume. While some instructors may view this advice as a "shell game" of moving information from one location (the syllabus) to another (an assignment handout), it is clear that today's students respond poorly to long and complicated documents. So, while the net information presented may be the same, students' perceptions and receptiveness may change significantly.

Moving toward andragogy means we must consider what *we* believe is necessary versus what *students* consider to be necessary. It may be beneficial to take a section out of a syllabus and put it into another document when a learning management system like Moodle can act as a central location for course information. This contradicts a long history of syllabus recommendations that "more is better" (e.g., Davis, 1993; Habanek, 2005), but we see this as a workable compromise between comprehensiveness and impact (usage). Ultimately, no matter what final balance an instructor achieves regarding this

question, we believe that the reading habits of today's students make Leeds' (1992) argument regarding the need to write clearly and succinctly even more important.

Consider the Schedule Portion of the Syllabus as Most Important for Students

We should continue to present clearly course schedule and deadlines as the aforementioned evidence indicates that students pay close attention to this portion of the syllabus (Marcis & Carr, 2003). While evidence indicates that this is the one portion of the syllabus that most students find "necessary," many teachers seem to be vague and inconsistent in this portion of the syllabus (Habanek, 2005). We suspect that part of this lack of clarity may be because of an instructor's planning horizon, but calendar control can also represent a subtle power issue that ultimately establishes who is in charge of the course. Consequently, a move toward andragogy-based learning suggests that instructors either make their schedules clear and/or directly involve students in the planning and calendaring process.

Learning management systems make clear scheduling easier. We have gotten into the habit of inputting the entire course's basic materials into each learning management system week, mirroring the syllabus schedule. Within this scaffolding, extra or current material may be added as desired and responsive flexibility is maintained. Students and faculty alike, however, benefit from a planned, available set of materials supporting learning objectives and signaling respect for everyone's time and preparation energy.

Consider Syllabus Design and Layout for Accessibility and Engagement

While the literature has devoted some attention to verbal communication strategies designed to make the first day of class feel like a welcoming environment (cf. Thompson, 2007, for its summary), as noted, there has been relatively little focus on the messages and signals conveyed by the actual presentation of the syllabus itself. Even studies that included syllabus design as part of their data collection procedures have only presented a summary, without comment, of different design approaches employed (cf. Parkes, Fix, & Harris, 2003, p. 64). The little advice that has been given essentially exhorts teachers to construct syllabi that are "professional," "organized," and "employ consistent headings and fonts" (cf. Hess, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Leeds, 1992). As important, class enrollments may be fluid during the initial

"drop-add" week of classes, so an instructor's carefully crafted first day welcoming session will have zero impact on students who are not physically present, and students who are present may be overwhelmed by the scope of activities typical of the first week back on campus.

As a result, syllabi, as enduring and "live" documents, have to stand on their own to get attention. Fonts, graphics, spacing, and other design elements convey different meanings and intentions. Different presentations can transmit tones ranging from playful to serious. For example, the ubiquitous Times New Roman typeface was the default font in Microsoft Word for many years. Consider Microsoft Corporation's (2010b) description of the font:

> This remarkable typeface first appeared in 1932 in The Times of London newspaper, for which it was designed . . . it has many old style characteristics . . . Widely used in books and magazines, for reports, office documents and also for display and advertising.

It is clear from the description that Times New Roman is an "old style" typeface conveying formality and solemnity. Conversely, consider the message sent by Microsoft when it set Calibri as the default font in new versions of Word. According to Microsoft Corporation (2010a):

> Calibri is a modern sans serif family with subtle roundings on stems and corners . . . Calibri's many curves and the new rasteriser team up in bigger sizes to reveal a warm and soft character.

Thus, Microsoft itself is signaling its movement from a classic and formal selection to one that is more modern, warm, and soft.

Instructors will want to pay careful attention to their syllabus layout and presentation, and if necessary, seek assistance from campus teaching and learning centers. For example, bullet points can be used instead of long, dense paragraphs. Varying heading sizes and spacing can maintain interest in lieu of repetitive, unchanging structures. Colored fonts can draw attention to critical syllabus information or can color-code related information for students. Finally, leaving some open spaces on pages assists with perceptual manageability.

For readers who still doubt the power of actual document layout and presentation to affect how we process and recall information, we invite them to read Edward Tufte's analysis of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's ineffective and inappropriate use of PowerPoint as a communication tool and the role that it played in the demise of the space shuttle Columbia located at http://www.edwardtufte.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg?msg_id=0001yB.

Consider Our Paper- Versus Our Students' Electronic-Based Worldview for Readability

While many instructors came of age during a predominantly paper-based world, today's students may only use electronic versions of our syllabi through cell phones, laptops, e-book readers, and tablet devices. Indeed, one of us works at an institution whose leadership has attempted to halt the paper distribution of syllabi, as a cost-savings measure, but also in recognition that students are very comfortable with all-electronic access. Thus, teachers will want to consider their syllabi's readability using these media.

Accessibility is also an issue. There is no single accessibility solution that works for all students. In distributing our documents only in hardcopy form, we inadvertently deny access to students who only use electronic formats throughout the semester. In posting a document to a course's website using Microsoft Word, we deny access to students who use their Kindles. In posting our documents in Adobe Acrobat format, we may forget that students are trying to read its 10-point Times New Roman font on the 4-inch screen of a cell phone! In embedding a large graphic into the document we make it difficult and expensive for students to download it to their cell phones. Finally, in posting a well-designed but locked document we turn off students' ability to annotate it.

Thus, despite our best intentions and instructional desires for students to have a closely read and carefully annotated paper copy of their syllabus with them at all times, we must acknowledge that many of our students live a highly mobile and connected lifestyle and they could rely on our syllabus more if it were electronically accessible and readable. Although responding to this issue adds to instructor workload up front, having the syllabus available to students in a variety of formats and media choices will increase the chances they may access it.

Consider Designing the Syllabus as a Resource and Go-To Document

If the syllabus is indeed an integral part of the course, then the first week of class should not be the only time the syllabus is a key part of the classroom. We are not referring to ongoing "that's in the syllabus" type comments as "revisiting." An andragogical syllabus can be explicitly designed as a central focus of the class. For example, the design could routinely link learning goals, objectives, and broader learning outcomes as part of assignment descriptions, making ongoing discussion of both why these activities are happening and how students can personally expect to benefit from doing them

much easier. This approach could help move teachers and students beyond a tendency to stick to the "what needs to happen" focus of many assignment conversations and instead encourage deeper andragogically- inspired philosophical conversations. Like the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the syllabus could serve as the cultural heart of the course. Approaches like this have the added advantage of concretely connecting students to assurance of learning outcomes, which is becoming an increasingly important issue to accreditation site visit teams. Taking the revisiting a step further to match the lifestyles of Generation Y students, the bold instructor may wish to do things like sending text messages to students reminding them of upcoming course events or referring them to a relevant, just-posted popular press story.

Consider Our Own Ambiguity Preferences to Balance Structure With Student Input

As we noted earlier, the move toward an andragogical-based syllabus is not an "all or nothing" proposition. Singham's (2005) description of his complete redesign of his physics syllabus indicates that he is a teacher with a very high tolerance for ambiguity, so most of us will want to assess what "classic" syllabi approaches we are willing to drop and which ones we are unwilling to drop. Weimer (2010) advocates a continuous and evolving process, and reminds instructors that even small changes can be enormously meaningful and empowering. Table 1 in our companion article, for example, provides changes that reflect different instructor–student collaboration levels. This will indeed be a reflective process that will likely entail much trial and error, but any successful process will ultimately start with the classic adage of "know thyself!"

Closing Comments

The move from a pedagogically-focused to an andragogically-based syllabus requires both a philosophical shift and an actual implementation in practice. Our companion article provided the rationale why we need to revisit our conceptualization of the course syllabus, some of the philosophical questions that need to be considered, and some examples from of our own personal journeys down this path. This article directly explores the nuts-and-bolts syllabus design topics that we believe all instructors will encounter as they begin their own redesign processes. Some of the practical tips presented here are relatively easy and straightforward to implement—with clear payoffs in the classroom—regardless of how committed one is to adopting andragogical

principles, while others will likely require ongoing experimentation and iterations as instructors seek to find their own optimal balance. We encourage all instructors, teaching students at any level, to begin the journey of innovating for a 21st-century syllabus.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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