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Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education

by Michael S. Palmer,
Lindsay B. Wheeler,
and Itiya Aneece

In Short

- Traditional or content-focused syllabi make clear what the “course will do” and what “students will **NOT** do.” A lot of bolding, all-capping, italicizing, and underlining are obligatory aesthetic elements of these documents.
- Learning-focused syllabi are characterized by engaging, question-driven course descriptions; long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals; clear, measurable learning objectives; robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions; detailed course schedules; a focus on student success; and, an inviting, approachable, and motivating tone.
- When students read a learning-focused syllabus, they have significantly more positive perceptions of the document itself, the course described by the syllabus, and the instructor associated with the course.
- It is not enough to require syllabi, we need to require the *right* type of syllabi. Learning-focused ones can positively affect student motivation before students even enter the classroom, making meaningful engagement in the course much more likely.

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Search online for the word *syllabus* and you're likely to find—in addition to millions of actual syllabi—articles pointing to how-to guides, requirements, recommendations, policies, boilerplate, bloat, and even information on how to create “legally sound” syllabi. Universities in the US and abroad require them, some legislatures govern them, faculty love to hate them, and students (only sometimes) read them. Is all this attention warranted? Does this document even matter?

Essentially, the syllabus is a physical artifact outlining key structural elements of a course. It often serves contractual, record keeping, and/or communication functions. It is the place where faculty describe what content they will cover, what books and articles their students will read, the assignments they will complete, dates when things are due, and all the policies and rules that are supposed to keep everyone happy and out of trouble.

Traditional syllabi—which we label here as content-focused syllabi—are ubiquitous and easily spotted. More than anything, content-focused syllabi make clear what the “course will do” and what “students will **NOT** do.” A lot of bolding, all capping, italicizing, and underlining are obligatory aesthetic elements of these documents. Traditional syllabi also have predictable and mundane section headings, like *Instructor Information*, *Due Dates*, and *Grading*, often in predictable order. Course descriptions typically are pulled directly from online course catalogues and filled with disciplinary jargon written when current students were probably still in middle school. They also likely inaccurately represent the content actually covered in the course. Course schedules, when included, are at best a list of reading assignments, due dates, and exam dates.

DEATH TO THE SYLLABUS?

In “Death to the Syllabus!,” Mano Singham boldly states, “It is time to declare war on the traditional course syllabus” (Singham, 2007, p. 52). Like Singham and other critics, we argue that content-focused syllabi have become increasingly authoritative and rule-infested to the detriment of student learning. We suggest instead that the syllabus’ primary function should be as a learning tool, one that is carefully crafted through a systematic course design process.

When framed as a learning tool, the syllabus looks and reads much differently than one that is content-focused. Learning-focused syllabi make clear what “you [the student] will do” and what “we [the class, including the instructor] will do” throughout the semester. They are developed from principles of backward-integrated course design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), educative assessment, active learning, evidence-based pedagogies, and student motivation (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2007). They are characterized by engaging, question-driven course descriptions; long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals; clear, measurable learning objectives; robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions; detailed course schedules framed in what author Ken Bain (2004) calls “beautiful questions;” a focus on student success (Cullen, & Harris, 2009; Palmer, Streifer,

& Bach, 2014); and, an inviting, approachable, and motivating tone.

Learning-focused syllabi have section headings that guide students: *What you’ll learn along the way*, *How you’ll know you’re learning*, *What you’ll be doing*, *A few things to help you be successful*. They are also often visually interesting, having well-designed layouts with relevant quotes or images that capture students’ attention. The policies and rules that dominate content-focused syllabi are generally absent. When these elements need to appear, they are framed in ways that make transparent to students how each policy or rule supports the learning environment or builds from disciplinary expectations. For example, an attendance policy might describe how students’ regular preparation and presence supports healthy discussions or a plagiarism policy in a psychology course might be framed in terms of the discipline’s code of ethics.

Given that learning-focused syllabi are grounded in evidence-based teaching and learning principles and student motivation theories, one might expect students to appreciate and privilege them over more traditional, content/policy-focused ones. But again, *does the document really matter*, in terms of what students attend to in syllabi, their perceptions of the course described by the document, and the instructor associated with course?

In several studies (Doolittle, & Siudzinski, 2010), researchers have found that when reading traditional syllabi students primarily focus their attention on elements related to performance, such as grading, policies, and due dates. So the document matters, but is this all a syllabus is good for? In another study, one that perhaps comes closest to addressing the question at hand, Harnish and Bridges (2011) provide evidence that a “syllabus written in a friendly, rather than unfriendly tone evoked [student] perceptions of the instructor being more warm, more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course” (p. 319). This suggests the possibility that the syllabus has the potential to affect motivation before students enter the classroom.

If we assume that the document does matter, could it be that the type of syllabus also matters? For instance, could one type of syllabus decrease motivation and another

We argue that content-focused syllabi have become increasingly authoritative and rule-infested to the detriment of student learning. We suggest instead that the syllabus’ primary function should be as a learning tool...

Figure 1. Content- and learning-focused syllabi differ in dramatic ways, as shown in the two sample course descriptions here.

Content-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

Course Overview

This course emphasizes the major political, social, economic and intellectual developments in the nation from the Civil War to the present and aims to challenge students to critically analyze these developments. The course also examines how events and developments that occurred prior to 1865 influenced the nation's evolution after the Civil War. The course will cover such topics as Reconstruction, the New Deal, the Great Depression, the Atomic Age, the Cold War, and the 1960s. Due to the constraints of the semester, the 1970s-80s will only be covered generally, while the 1990's-today will not be covered.

Learning-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

A bit about the course

You've probably studied U.S. history before, exploring the major themes, events, and people who have shaped this country. In your other history courses, you may have learned certain historical information and then been required to write clear, evidence-based arguments about the past. We will do that, but I expect you will find this course to be different in useful and challenging ways.

Together, we will explore how and why individuals chose to act—or not to act—in response to the local, national, and global forces that have shaped the United States since 1865. For example, how did Americans respond to the U.S. acquiring and using the atomic bomb? And how were they affected by the 20th-century tech boom? Historians call this approach *social history*, a major trend in historical analysis over the past few decades. This focus on the lives of ordinary (and not so ordinary) people can help you deeply understand the past. It also might prompt you to reflect on how and why *you* choose to act (or not to act) in response to the local, national, and global forces shaping our world now.

To allow you to experience doing what historians do, you will get to contribute to an oral history project. This project, developed in partnership with a local community organization, will encourage you to ask some big questions about how to do historical research and historical meaning as well as to explore the relationship between personal/local stories and national ones.

increase it? To answer this question, we conducted an experiment to systematically probe students' perceptions of different types of syllabi, the courses described by the syllabi, and the instructors associated with the courses.

CONTENT- VS. LEARNING-FOCUSED SYLLABI

In seeking to answer these questions, we created two syllabi for the same course—a content-focused syllabus and a learning-focused syllabus. We chose an introductory history course, *United States History Since 1865*, since many students might take such a course as a general education requirement (see Figure 1). The syllabi were constructed using our syllabus rubric, which received the 2014 POD

Network Innovation Award and was designed to assess the degree to which a syllabus achieves a learning orientation (Palmer, Bach, & Streifer, 2014).

Our syllabus rubric is organized around four criteria: Learning Goals and Objectives, Assessment Activities, Schedule, and Overall Learning Environment—this last involving tone, promise, and inclusivity of the syllabus. These criteria are further subdivided into 13 distinct components. Using the full range of these components, we produced a content-focused syllabus that would score below 5 on the rubric's 46-point scale and a learning-focused syllabus that would score above 40 (see Figure 2).

GAUGING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SYLLABI

A total of 1,199 undergraduate students at UVa were randomly selected to participate in the study and contacted via email to voluntarily complete our online survey during a two-week window in the spring 2014 semester. A total of 127 students consented to complete the survey (10.6% response rate), which took approximately 30 minutes. Study participants randomly received either the content- ($n = 66$) or learning-focused syllabus ($n = 61$) to read.

After reading their assigned document, study participants responded to 100 Likert-style questions about their perceptions of the syllabus (e.g., the syllabus is well-organized), the course described by the syllabus (e.g., this course would help me understand how experts approach this topic), and the instructor associated with the course (e.g., the instructor is approachable). Participants also answered a series of open-ended questions in each of these categories to help us contextualize the data (e.g., What would encourage you to continually refer to the syllabus throughout the semester?).

Figure 2. The award-winning syllabus rubric of the University of Virginia’s Center for Teaching Excellence describes the key components of learning-focused syllabi as well as ideas for where to find evidence of each component and examples of what to look for. Two of the components focused on the overall learning environment are shown below.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>The tone of the document is positive, respectful, inviting, and directly addresses the student as a competent, engaged learner.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The positive, respectful, inviting tone is conveyed throughout the document. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Personal pronouns (e.g. you, we, or us) are used, rather than “the students,” “the course,” or “they.” ○ The focus of the document is on learning and possibilities and not policies and punishments. • The syllabus contains a “promise” that will be fulfilled through mutual effort by instructor and students if the learning goals and objectives are met. Evidence for “promise” could include: language that emphasizes collaborative spirit; verbs that focus on what students and instructors do, not what the course, or some other abstract entity, does; clear statement of connections between course content and paths to answering “big questions.” |
| <p>The syllabus signposts a learning environment that fosters positive motivation, one that promotes a learning orientation rather than a performance one. The document describes the potential value of the course in the learner’s current and post-course life (cognitive, personal, social, civic, and/or professional) in a clear and dynamic way. It clearly communicates that content is used primarily as a vehicle for learning, to understand core principles in the discipline, promote critical thinking and other significant learning objectives.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The course description makes clear that students will have opportunities to <i>wonder</i> and connect it in meaningful ways to things potentially important to them. The instructor encourages students to “discover” value in the course by giving them choices along the way, such as choices in project topics, reading assignments, grading schemes. • Various course components—description, objectives, schedule—frame the content through compelling, beautiful questions or big ideas. • The instructor uses information from pre-course questionnaires, background checks, pre-course exams, etc. to tailor the learning environment. In other words, he/she considers students’ backgrounds in designing course activities and assignments and takes steps to reach out to students who might struggle in class. |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student is left in control of his/her learning. For example, mastery-based grading mechanisms (e.g. criterion-referenced, task-based, and absolute grading schemes) are used rather than performance ones (e.g. grading curves, and other relative or group-referenced grading schemes). • The instructor also provides resources or instruction related to becoming a lifelong learner, either in general or in ways specific to the discipline. • The syllabus de-emphasizes course policies by positioning them late in the syllabus or in a separate document and connecting them to clear pedagogical purposes. The syllabus frames policies in positive ways, as opposed to lists of “do nots.” |
|--|---|

What We Discovered

We present below key findings for each major component of the study: 1) perceptions of syllabus, 2) perceptions of course, and 3) perceptions of instructor. We provide descriptions of our quantitative results and where appropriate, we have included representative participant quotes. The survey group who read the learning-focused syllabus is labeled LFS and those that read the content-focused syllabus CFS.

Perceptions of syllabi: We asked a wide range of questions about the document, which were broadly organized into three categories: syllabus structure (e.g., the syllabus is well organized); syllabus tone (e.g., the syllabus is positive, respectful, and inviting); and syllabus interest (e.g., the syllabus is boring/interesting).

Highlights include:

- Overall, the LFS group had significantly more positive perceptions of the actual document than the CFS group.
- In terms of structure, LFS participants found the document significantly more thorough *and* also more difficult to follow. It is true that learning-focused syllabi tend to be longer than others. This is a by-product of attempts to make the learning environment more transparent, a feature other researchers have correlated with gains in student confidence and sense of belonging (Winkelmes, 2013). The perceived difficulty of following the document may have more to do with students’ expectations about the purpose of syllabi than the clarity of the actual document.

LFS quote: “This syllabus seemed rather long, yet thorough in order to make [clear] all class assignments and policies.”

CFS quote: “The syllabus is very clear cut and organized. Information is easy to find.”

- LFS participants had significantly more positive perceptions of the tone of the syllabus, especially aspects related to how caring they perceived the instructor (see Figure 3).

LFS quote: “The syllabus is extremely comprehensive but also gets me excited to work with the teacher and participate in the class.”

CFS quote: “The tone of the syllabus makes the professor seem cold, uncompromising, and unfriendly... I would immediately think the professor is a hard ass—I’d expect a great number of students to drop the class after receiving the syllabus.”

CFS quote: “I don’t have strong feelings about it. The formatting is clean and boring, no real issues. Doesn’t seem interesting a course though (sic).”

- LFS participants also found the syllabus significantly more interesting and relevant to their life.

LFS quote: “I like how they emphasize the realistic aspects of learning and participating rather than simply laying out work to be done.”

I like how they emphasize the realistic aspects of learning and participating, rather than simply laying out the work to be done.

- LFS participants perceived the instructor information, course materials, course objectives, assessment activities, and tips for success significantly more helpful than CFS participants. This is consistent with the emphasis learning-focused syllabi place on goals and objectives, assessment of learning, and overall student success.

LFS quote: “[The syllabus] appears to be a well thought-out and very reliable for students who may be confused on what their future assignments are.”

CFS quote: “I really did not pay much attention to [the syllabus] aside from noticing what kind of information I can access, like when exams will be and what readings are due on which days.”

- The two components most characteristic of content-focused syllabi—grades and policies—are perceived to be no more or no less helpful in either type of syllabus. In other words, the over-emphasis of policies and grades in content-focused syllabi and, possibly, the under-emphasis of these in learning-focused syllabi appear to be lost on students, at least when the syllabi are not directly compared.
- Students find neither type of syllabus condescending. This is important because one of the one most commonly expressed beliefs of faculty developing learning-focused syllabi in our course design institutes is that the document feels condescending. But, the informal and sometimes personal language adopted in many

Figure 3. Though differences in tone between content- and learning-focused syllabi run throughout the documents, they are often most striking when policies are described.

Content-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

Course Policies and Student Expectations

- Attendance at each lecture is expected. It is essential that students come to class regularly if they hope to perform well in the class. Class will begin promptly at 2:00pm, so be on time.
- Students should come to class prepared for the day’s lecture. Preparation includes having completed any assignments that are due, being ready to listen and answer questions during the lecture, and finishing all the assigned readings for the class.
- Once in class, it is expected that students will be attentive, including taking notes, and that students will show respect to their classmates and the instructor.
- No class work will be accepted via email. All papers must be submitted as a hard copy on the date they are due. Late papers will be penalized.
- Quizzes can only be taken in class and cannot be made up regardless of reason.
- Review Sheets and any other handouts will not be sent to students electronically. They must be picked up in class or at the instructor’s office.
- Students must bring a Blue Book to each exam.
- Students must turn off all cell phones, watch alarms, etc. in class unless they have extenuating circumstances that they have spoken with the instructor about.
- Cheating in any form, including plagiarism, will not be tolerated. Cheating on any assignment or test will result in a failing grade for the assignment or test and may also result in a failing grade for the course. Please note that each student is responsible for the work he or she turns in. Students who cheat will be reported to the Honor Council.

Learning-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

A few course policies

Due dates are firm, but extensions requested ahead of time are normally granted. In all cases, later work is preferable to plagiarism, which is considered a violation of the honor code. What is plagiarism? Generally speaking, it is any attempt to take credit for work done by another person. All historians, including undergraduates, must rely on the work of others to shape their own knowledge and interpretations. In their writing, they must acknowledge the importance of other works through footnotes and/or direct textual references to influential books, articles, and ideas. Failure to acknowledge the work of others, or transposing sentences, words, and concepts into your own work without using quotation marks or citations can result in plagiarism. Working with a professor, tutor, or friend to clarify your ideas and organization for a paper or presentation is generally not plagiarism. Using an outline or thesis given to you by someone else without substantial modification is plagiarism. If you have any questions about what may constitute plagiarism, please consult with me. There is no penalty for honest inquiry or confusion.

learning-focused syllabi does not lead to negative perceptions, at least for our study participants.

Perceptions of the course: We asked study participants a series of questions about how interesting they thought the course described by the syllabus might be, what they might learn, and what a typical class period might look like (see Figure 4).

Highlights include:

- Overall, LFS participants had significantly more positive perceptions of the course than CFS participants.
- Participants' perceptions of whether the course represented by the syllabus would require more work than their other courses was significantly higher for the LFS participants. This is not surprising given that learning-

Figure 4. The schedule in content-focused syllabi are often limited to abstract topic headings and due dates, whereas the schedule for learning-focused syllabi include provocative questions, suggestions on how to prepare, and reminders. Excerpts from our sample syllabi are shown here.

| Content-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865 | | | | |
|---|--|---|--------------------|--|
| Class Schedule | | | | |
| DATE | TOPIC | READINGS (from textbook) | ASSIGNMENTS | |
| 2/2 | Reconstruction: 1865-1877 | Ch 19, p 321-330 | | |
| 2/7 & 2/9 | The Gilded Age: 1870-1900 | Ch 20, p 330-342 | | |
| 2/14 & 2/16 | Race, Empire, and Culture in the Gilded Age: 1870-1900 | Ch 21, p 342-347 | | |
| 2/21 & 2/23 | The Progressive Era: 1890-1917 | Ch 22, p 347-360 | | |
| 2/28 | World War I: 1914-1919 | Ch 23, p 360-379 | | |

Learning-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

What you'll be doing

The following times and topics are tentative and may shift slightly to foster a more effective learning environment. Nothing will be made due earlier than indicated but some things may be pushed back or eliminated altogether, depending on time. All changes will be announced in class and posted on the course website.

| Date | Questions/themes we'll explore... | How to prepare for discussions... | Quick Reminders... |
|------|--|---|---|
| 2/2 | What big question & themes are worth exploring? | | |
| 2/7 | Reconstruction: What was actually being reconstructed? | Read <i>Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom</i> , chapter 2 – on Blackboard | Reading Check |
| 2/9 | Gilded Age (growth): Does rapid industrialization change everything? | Read <i>Sisters</i> , Introduction and chapter 1 Submit your discussion question online one hour before class. | In-class debate (details will be provided in class) |
| 2/14 | Gilded Age (paradoxes): Is all that glitters gold? | Read <i>Sisters</i> , chapters 2-3 | Reading Check |
| 2/16 | Populists and Progressives: How to reform the country? | Read <i>Sisters</i> , chapter 4 | Longer exam essay questions distributed |
| 2/21 | U.S. in the world: Should the U.S. have an empire? | Read <i>Sisters</i> , chapter 5 and afterward | Reading Check By 2:30pm, remember to email me a complete draft of your interview questions (bring a copy to class) |

focused courses rely on active pedagogies and self-directed learning, and this is often explicitly stated in learning-focused syllabi.

LFS quote: “[Students] will need to have a deep understanding of the material, this does not seem like a course where memorizing facts right before the exam would be a good strategy.”

CFS quote: “I would expect a typical class period to look like a standard lecture class where the professor just stands in front of the class and talks for the entire class.”

CFS quote: “This class seems easy/not very rigorous.”

The LFS group expected to learn more important concepts, more important study skills relevant to their college

and future careers, and to better understand how to think like an expert. This perception is likely shaped by course descriptions and schedules in learning-focused syllabi, which are often framed with provocative or engaging questions that help the learner discover meaning in the content. It is also likely influenced by learning objectives that consider cognitive and affective components of learning.

LFS quote, emphasis added: “Always keep up with the readings, and not just read them but form opinions and thoughts about them that they would express during lively in-class discussions. They would have to *develop this personal historical-type thinking* and utilize it throughout their writing assignments.”

CFS quote: “Listen to her lecture the entire class, take notes while she lectures (no interaction between her and me, or between me and my classmates) and then leave.”

Earning-focused courses rely on active pedagogies and self-directed learning, and this is often explicitly stated in learning-focused syllabi.

- Overall, LFS participants perceived the course associated with the syllabus they read will involve less lecturing and more active learning strategies (Figure 5). This perception likely stems from the explicit descriptions of instructional strategies in learning-focused syllabi, strategies that rely on active and collaborative learning techniques such as small-group discussion, case study analysis, and debates. The CFS group perceived that the course would rely almost exclusively on lecturing. Whether or not the syllabus indicates that lecture is a primary mode of instruction, students' past experiences likely lead to this belief.

LFS quote: "I would expect some form of lecture about the material, then some sort of engaging activity, such as a group analysis of a historical document or a class debate."

LFS quote: "Probably not a typical lecture—discussions, debates, small group work, etc."

CFS quote: "One hour of non-interactive lecture in a large lecture hall. Professor uses PowerPoint and uploads slides after class, perhaps hinting at points that will be covered on an exam."

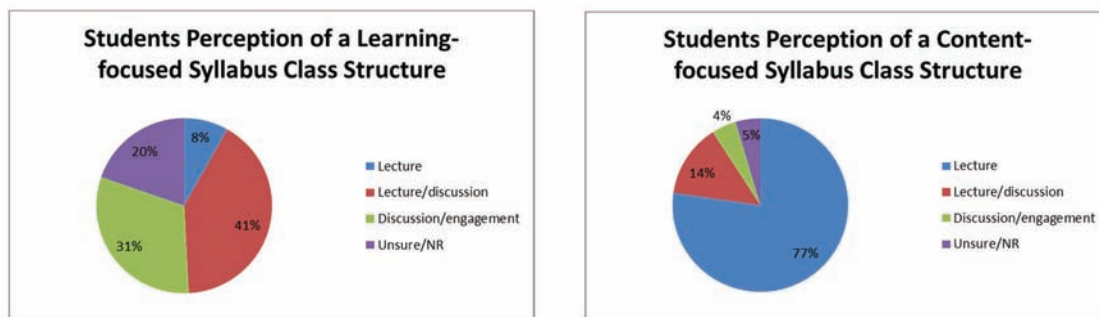
CFS quote: "Lecture, lecture and more lecture."

Perceptions of instructor: The questions we asked study participants about the instructor included a number of topics such as approachability and student-instructor interaction and overall instructor expectations.

Highlights include:

- Overall, LFS participants had significantly more positive perceptions of the instructor than CFS participants. Specifically, they believed the instructor would be more approachable, caring, encouraging, helpful, and supportive. This is not surprising given learning-focused syllabi focus on setting a positive tone, describe ways the instructor will help students' succeed, and indicate opportunities for additional help (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 5. COMPARISON BETWEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES PREDICTED EXCLUSIVELY FROM LEARNING- AND CONTENT-FOCUSED SYLLABI



When students read a learning-focused syllabus, they have significantly more positive perceptions of the document itself, the course described by the syllabus, and the instructor associated with the course.

Figure 6. Because content-focused courses often rely on very traditional forms of assessment, the descriptions of the assessments are often utilitarian and do little to inspire students. Learning-focused syllabi, on the other hand, connect assessments to the learning objectives and to things that potentially matter in the students' lives.

Content-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

Course Requirements

Each student in the course will be expected to complete three exams and one essay during the semester.

Exams – Each exam will consist of three sections: an identification section, a short answer section, and an essay section. Review sheets will be distributed before the exams to assist students in their preparation. Review sheets will only be distributed in class and will not be sent out electronically to students. *All students are required to bring an unmarked Blue Book to each exam.* These Blue Books will be collected in class on the day of the test and redistributed before the exam begins. The final exam will not be cumulative.

Quizzes - Students are required to take a short reading quiz at the start of each class period. Quizzes can only be taken in class and cannot be made up regardless of reason.

Essay – Students are required to write one 3-4 page double-spaced essay based on *Making Freedom: African Americans in U.S. History*. The assignment is not a research paper and should be based on the book alone. The essay is due when we will be discussing the 1960's in class. Students should come ready to discuss the book when they turn in their papers.

Learning-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

How you'll know you're learning

Throughout the course, you will have multiple opportunities to explore a variety of historical events, engage in historical thinking, form and develop arguments, and share what you learn through discussion and writing. We will, for example, have frequent in-class discussions, debates, small group activities, and other similar exercises. In addition, the following activities will help guide you through the learning process and help you measure your progress as you move toward deeper understanding.

Reading Checks. Every week, you will be given a short out-of-class writing assignment based on the scheduled readings for the upcoming class period, no more than one (1) page, to help you more fully analyze the readings and prepare for class. As already mentioned above, this course is built on the expectation that students want to be active learners, and keeping up with the reading empowers you to take full advantage of class discussions and lectures.

Oral History Project. The entire class will conduct an oral history project in partnership with the Hawfields Presbyterian Home (HPH). This oral history project is a priority of HPH, which is eager to preserve the history of elders in the community. It is also essential to our course because it will allow you to practice what historians do—gather, evaluate, and make sense of new historical sources. Doing this project, and doing it well, matters not only for the success of our course, but also to our local community.

You will work in pairs throughout the semester both in- and out-of-class (see the Schedule for details and due dates) to complete the oral history project. Each pair will research relevant local and personal history, develop interview questions, interview one person from the HPH community, accurately and fully transcribe that interview, analyze the interview for the class, and present a complete audio recording and written transcript of the interview to the HPH community...

LFS quote: “I thought the instructor based on the syllabus seemed very approachable, and encouraging towards their students. I thought they were also very passionate for their course, and intended on helping their students become better thinkers and students.”

LFS quote: “He/she genuinely cares that the students LEARN the material and not just simply memorize it.”

CFS quote: “The instructor seems fairly harsh from this syllabus. Reading the end especially, where work won’t be accepted regardless of reasons shows me that this is a professor who isn’t out to help or understand the needs of their students. Very cold and robotic structure (while easily read) does not give a positive impression.”

CFS quote: “Unfriendly, unapproachable, STRICT.”

- LFS participants believed the instructor set high expectation and would help them succeed more than CFS participants.

LFS quote: “The instructor seems to expect a lot from his students, but he also seems encouraging and understanding.”

CFS quote: “The instructor seems strict and more concerned about policy than students’ learning.”

How the Document Matters

The results of our study suggest that not only does the syllabus matter, the type of syllabus matters. When students read a learning-focused syllabus, they have significantly more positive perceptions of the document itself, the course described by the syllabus, and the instructor associated with the course.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data clearly suggests that instructors have very little to lose by creating a learning-focused syllabus. In fact, they have much to gain. Specifically, students in our study viewed the learning-focused syllabus as a useful, organizing document, the course as an interesting, relevant, and rigorous learning experience, and the instructor as a caring and supportive individual integral to the learning process.

In practical terms, the data provides support and guidance to those who create and mandate these documents. It is not enough to require syllabi, we need to require the *right* type of syllabi. Our study supports the claims that syllabi should not be the authoritarian, policy-laded, contractual documents they have come to be, both in principle and practice, but instead invitations into rich, meaningful, and supportive learning experiences. The syllabus can positively affect student motivation before students even enter the classroom, making the possibility for meaningful engagement in the course much more likely. ☐

RESOURCES

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