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Research Yields Tips on Crafting Better Syllabi

By PAULA WASLEY

Many professors don't give much thought to what students take away from their syllabi. If that's the case, you may want to borrow a page or two from a few researchers who have formally pondered the question:

Watch Your Language

How you frame assignments and requirements on your syllabus can make a world of difference in how students perceive you, says John T. Ishiyama, a professor of political science at Truman State University.

In 2000, Mr. Ishiyama and Stephen Hartlaub, an associate professor of political science at Frostburg State University, compared undergraduates' responses to two hypothetical syllabi for a course on American government, and published the results in the journal *PS: Political Science & Politics*.

While the requirements on both were identical, one syllabus phrased them in negative or "punishing" terms, and the other in positive or "rewarding" terms. For instance, one syllabus told students who did not seek advance permission to miss an examination or due date that they would be "graded down 20%." The other syllabus stated that students who did not seek permission would only be "eligible for 80% of the total points."

While students appraised both classes as having a similar level of difficulty, they said they would be significantly less comfortable approaching the author of the "punishing" syllabus.

"We all know perception is a big part of learning," says Mr. Ishiyama. If students peg you as either approachable or intimidating from the start, he says, "usually it's a self-fulfilling prophesy."

Assert Your Authority

"Probably no other contract we will ever encounter is drafted with so little attention paid to the language," says Diann L. Baecker, an associate professor of languages and literature at Virginia State University.

Ms. Baecker examined pronoun use on syllabi for clues to how faculty members navigate issues of power and authority in the classroom, for a 1998 study in the journal *College Teaching*.

Her tallies revealed that "you" was the most commonly used pronoun (accounting for 55 percent to 82 percent of the pronoun usage on the sample syllabi). "I"s were relatively absent, composing only 9 percent to 38 percent of the pronouns.

More interesting, perhaps, was the lengths to which many instructors went to avoid using any pronouns at all in their syllabi. "There's no mention of who's calculating the grade," says Ms. Baecker.

In her own syllabi, Ms. Baecker lays it all out in "You" and "I" sections that enumerate the specific responsibilities of each pronominal party. "I think it gives you a more honest classroom where the responsibilities are clear," she says.

Don't Forget the Date

It's more important than you think, says Jay Parkes, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of New Mexico. Among the syllabus's primary functions, he notes, is as a permanent record within and across an institution.

Accreditation boards often review syllabi to verify that programs meet standard requirements; colleges consult them to determine the number of credits acquired when a student transfers from one institution to another.

When a faculty member leaves or stops teaching a class, his syllabus is often the only document his successor inherits. And, the syllabus – the kind with dates – serves as a record of personal and pedagogical development.

"I teach the same courses all the time, but they change," says Mr. Parkes. "If my syllabi aren't dated, I can't track the progress let alone anyone else who needs to."

Yet, when Mr. Parkes, Tracy K. Fix, a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico, and Mary B. Harris, an emerita professor of educational psychology at the University of New Mexico, conducted a survey of 200 syllabi for a 2003 study in the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, they noticed that 42 percent did not mention when the class was held, and 81 percent neglected to mention how many credit hours students would receive.

Know Your Audience

You may think students don't read, or even keep, your syllabi. You'd be only half right, according to Angela H. Becker and Sharon K. Calhoon, associate professors of psychology at Indiana University at Kokomo.

In a 1999 study, published in *Teaching of Psychology*, Ms. Becker and Ms. Calhoon looked at how students actually use the syllabus. They found that students

attended most to items like grading policies and the dates of tests and quizzes on syllabi, and paid relatively little attention to academic-dishonesty policies, textbook information, and basic course information like the course number, date, and credit hours. (Sorry, Mr. Parkes.)

As the semester progressed, students took greater note of assignments, the readings covered in tests, and the schedule of topics, but showed even less interest in the syllabus's policies on academic dishonesty and course drop dates – "all the things they should be paying attention to at the end of the semester," points out Ms. Becker.

More recently, for a study published in January in the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, the pair surveyed students in a 15-week general-psychology class about when and how frequently they used their syllabus. They started with the common faculty assumption that students would lose the syllabus, but in fact, they found that the majority held on to their copies through the second half of the semester.

Early in the semester, students reported that they looked at the syllabus just a few hours before class. After the six-week mark, however, there was more evidence of syllabus-assisted advance planning, with most students checking their syllabus a day before class.

"After midterm, they realized two hours before class is not a good time to find out if there is a quiz or what to read for class," says Ms. Becker.

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