

Using the course syllabus to document the quality of teaching and identifying its most useful items according to the students

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Introduction and aim of this paper

The impressive number of universities world-wide asking or urging their faculties to produce syllabi for each of their courses seems to indicate a consensus on the fact that this demanding - for both the institutions and each of their teachers - activity make sense (or should at least). The belief of the potential usefulness of syllabi for students and their professors, but also for their department and institution is shared by many authors emphasizing their various functions and purposes as *learning tool* (Grunert, 1997; Parkes & Harris, 2002 ; Woolcock, 2003), as *cognitive map* (Leeds, 1992 ; Matejka & Kurke, 1994 ; Nilson, 2007), as *contract* (Johnson, 2006; Duffy & Jones, 1995; Hammons & Shock, 1994), or more obviously as *communication tool* (Altman & Cashin, 1992 ; Rubin, 1985, Madson *et al.*, 2004). Alongside those well-known perspectives, another approach of the syllabus in the literature makes it suitable to attest the *quality* of teaching (“whether it is intended or not, the quality of the course outline - the syllabus - is a fairly reliable indicator of the quality of teaching and learning that will take place over the course of a semester”, Woolcock, 2003, p. 9).

This paper first discusses the use of the syllabus *items* in documenting and increasing the quality of teaching and course planning according to the literature. Secondly, in order to inspire institutions in their choices of the most valuable syllabus items in this perspective, this paper reports the result of a survey lead at the University of Liège in order to identify the most useful generic *items* to be included in course syllabi according to students’ opinion.

Using the course syllabus to document the quality of teaching

Using syllabi in faculty reviews?

In his study, Seldin (1998) investigated what sources of information were selected by 1202 academic deans to assess overall teaching performance. His results showed from 1988 to 1998 a progressive trend toward a greater use of syllabi to evaluate teaching competence (“increasingly, teaching competence is deduced from careful analysis of course syllabus and examinations”, Seldin, 1998, p.6). Although remaining “more opaque to academic eyes” for Strada (2001), more use of course syllabi in faculty evaluation is being admitted for the last decade (“as part of the review process, course syllabi are often used to communicate information about the instructor’s teaching ability”, Parkes & Harris, 2002, p. 57). Indeed, various authors (Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997 ; Appleby, 1999) emphasize the important role that syllabi can play in applications for tenure and promotion (“a well-done syllabus effectively communicates the nature and quality of a faculty member’s teaching philosophy and abilities to tenure and promotion committees or search committees at other universities”, Slattery & Carlson, 2005, p. 160). In that regard, researchers like Littlefield (1999) or Albers (in her article *Using the syllabus to document the scholarship of teaching*, 2003) consider the syllabus as a major component of teaching portfolios (“including a copy of the course syllabus in a teaching portfolio is usually recommended”, Leibow, 2003, p. 6). For Sinor and Kaplan (2009), this advice remains relevant for various career plans (“you may want to include your syllabus in your teaching portfolio when you go on the job market”).

Using syllabi in reviews of academic programs / departments / universities?

According to Parkes and Harris, “most academic programs and institutions choose to undergo accreditation reviews by professional organizations. Syllabi are often required as part of these reviews as well” (2002, p. 57). In order to explain the attention paid to these tools by the accrediting agencies, researchers stress the double reading level of courses that syllabi allow : on the one hand, “accrediting bodies look to syllabi to ascertain what happens in specific courses” (Slattery & Carlson, 2005, p. 160), and on the other hand, “syllabi are also used to examine the relationship of a course within the broader curriculum” (Mandernach, 2003). What the syllabi actually help to audit is the quality of “coherence” (Woolcock, 2003) between collegiate teaching aims and individual courses outcomes, and also between academic program and accreditation criteria (“the syllabi can be used to demonstrate that courses are in alignment with the department and/or institutional mission statements. They can also be used to show that the program is consistent with the expectations of the discipline and the accrediting agency”, Parkes & Harris, 2002, p. 57).

Why could it be used to document teaching quality?

In essence, course syllabus represents a useful document for review committee as it forms proper *evidence* of a faculty’s effectiveness, both in terms of teaching abilities (“during promotion and tenure reviews, syllabi may be examined as *evidence* of the instructor’s teaching quality”, Doolittle & Lusk, 2007, p. 63), and of scientific skills or attitude towards learners (“a syllabus can provide *evidence* of a teacher’s mastery of his field and of his responsibility towards his students”, Leibow, 2003, p. 6). According to the literature, this evidentiary value can be granted to the syllabus since it is supposed to offer by nature a true *mirror* of the course and its design, both connotatively and denotatively (“a syllabus is a document generated by an instructor to *reflect* the planning of the course”, Davis, 2002, p. 1). However, the construction of a course syllabus relates much more to *figurative* art than abstract art (“syllabus functions as a figure of the course and its theory. If I want to know what the course looks like from the outside, what the course looks like to colleagues, to students, to the parents of students, the syllabus will show me”, Collins, 1997, p.2). Concretely, the “evidentiary function” (Slattery & Carlson, 2005) of the syllabus is rooted in the transparency of various pedagogical and organisational aspects of academic course planning (“a well thought-out syllabus *reflects* careful course design with attention to clearly articulated student learning outcomes, activities that promote significant learning, and meaningful assessment”, Millis, 2009, p. 5), those *items* being therefore used as quality variables (“by providing details of what was covered, what students were expected to do, and how these outcomes and performances were assessed, syllabi can be quite helpful in efforts to evaluate both individual instructors and entire programs”, Parkes & Harris, 2002, 57).

Choice and implementation of syllabus items in quality-related matters

Generally similar from one to another university, the generic items included in syllabi are first and foremost chosen to reveal indeed the main dimensions of course planning. For instance, the *learning outcomes / objectives*, the *learning activities and teaching methods* (selected for their relevance, variety and flexibility according to Lemieux, 1995), the *assessment methods and criteria*; the *course prerequisites* or the *readings and materials* are among the aspects that an instructor ought to take into account in order to develop an efficient and consistent course. Yet, in the absence of an institutional policy requiring syllabi to be based on standard items, no guarantee exists that faculties would actually bring these concerns to their work, nor would formalise them in writing. From here, if it is obviously recommended, in order to document and increase the quality of teaching, to promote the institutional choice and the accurate implementation of syllabus items reflecting the main dimensions of course planning, we

suggest that it may be important as well, for the same purpose, to take into account in both these choice and implementation the perceptions and expectations of the students concerning those syllabus items.

Indeed, if the syllabus, as a communication tool, is known for involving several stakeholders (“the course syllabus is a written communication between the course instructor and students, colleagues, and administrators”, Garavalia, Hummel, Wiley & Huitt, 1999, p. 5), the student remains its very first beneficiary (“syllabi are course documents developed by instructors primarily to communicate to students the structure and procedures for course”, Wulff & Nyquist, 1990, p. 249). So, knowing that “for a syllabus to be most useful as a permanent record, the document should contain a number of small but important pieces of information” (Parkes & Harris, 2002, p.57), why not ask to students which ones would be the most valuable for them? According to many authors, students actually have expectations regarding the syllabus and its components (“the syllabus - what students eagerly await on the first day”, Sinor & Kaplan, 2009, p. 1). Since we are concerned about matters of *trust* between the actors of teaching and learning, why not seize the opportunity offered by the syllabus to establish a fertile relationship between faculty and students (“syllabus is one of the few formal, tangible links between you and your students”, Sinor & Kaplan, 2009, p. 1) by taking into account their expectations of contents ?

Identifying the most useful syllabus items for students : our survey

In order to inspire institutions in their choices of the most valuable standard items (and their implementation guidelines to their teachers), we lead a survey to identify *which items were perceived as the most useful ones to be included in course syllabi by undergraduate students.*

Related to this question, we have identified six comparable studies. This table synthesizes their various ways of approaching students’ perceptions of the most useful items to be included in a syllabus, as well as the instruments they used and the participants they surveyed.

| | Becker & Calhoon (1999) | Becker & Calhoon (2008) | Smith & Razzouk (1993) | Zucker (1992) | Garavalia et al. (1999) | Marcis & Carr (2008) |
|--|---|--|---|---|--|---|
| a) What the survey really assessed / collected data | How much they would attend to 29 syllabus items | What item they looked for when they last viewed their syllabus | What they remembered looking at most frequently in the syllabus | What students look for in course syllabi | Which syllabus components (out of 31/ 39) are considered important by students | How much they would attend to 28 syllabus items |
| b) How (instruments / questions) | Likert-type scale from 1 to 7 (“no attention at all – great deal of attention”) | Free choices (1 or more) out of 8 items | Open-ended questions depending upon students’ ability to recall information from the syllabus | Open-ended question : “When I received the syllabus, the first thing I looked for was...” | Likert-type scale from 1 to 5 (“not very important – very important”) | Likert-type scale from 1 to 7 (“no attention at all – great deal of attention”) |
| c) Who (education level and number of respondents) | 863 students in 19 sections of introductory psychology classes | 204 undergraduate students in 3 sections of General Psychology | 152 students in two upper-division Marketing courses | 194 undergraduate students in 4 different content areas | Pilot study : 83 students in 4 undergraduate psychology courses Primary study : 242 students in 8 sections of introductory psychology | 1726 undergraduate students enrolled in the Principles of Accounting course |

Studies assessing students’ perceptions regarding informational items to be included in course syllabi

Survey instrument

Considering the advantages and disadvantages of the instruments listed in table 1, we asked our participants to select and rank the 5 most useful items (perceived as such) out of a 16 list. The answers given by the respondent have been encoded according to two counting methods : considering the given rankings ($N^{\circ}1 = 5, N^{\circ}2 = 4, N^{\circ}3 = 3, N^{\circ}4 = 2, N^{\circ}5 = 1$) or not ($N^{\circ}1 = 1, N^{\circ}2 = 1, N^{\circ}3 = 1, N^{\circ}4 = 1, N^{\circ}5 = 1$). Following the examples of Becker and Calhoun (1999, 2008), Garavalia *et al.* (1999) or Marcis and Carr (2008), we have chosen a heuristic approach to identify those 16 items likely to appear on a syllabus from a review of the literature :

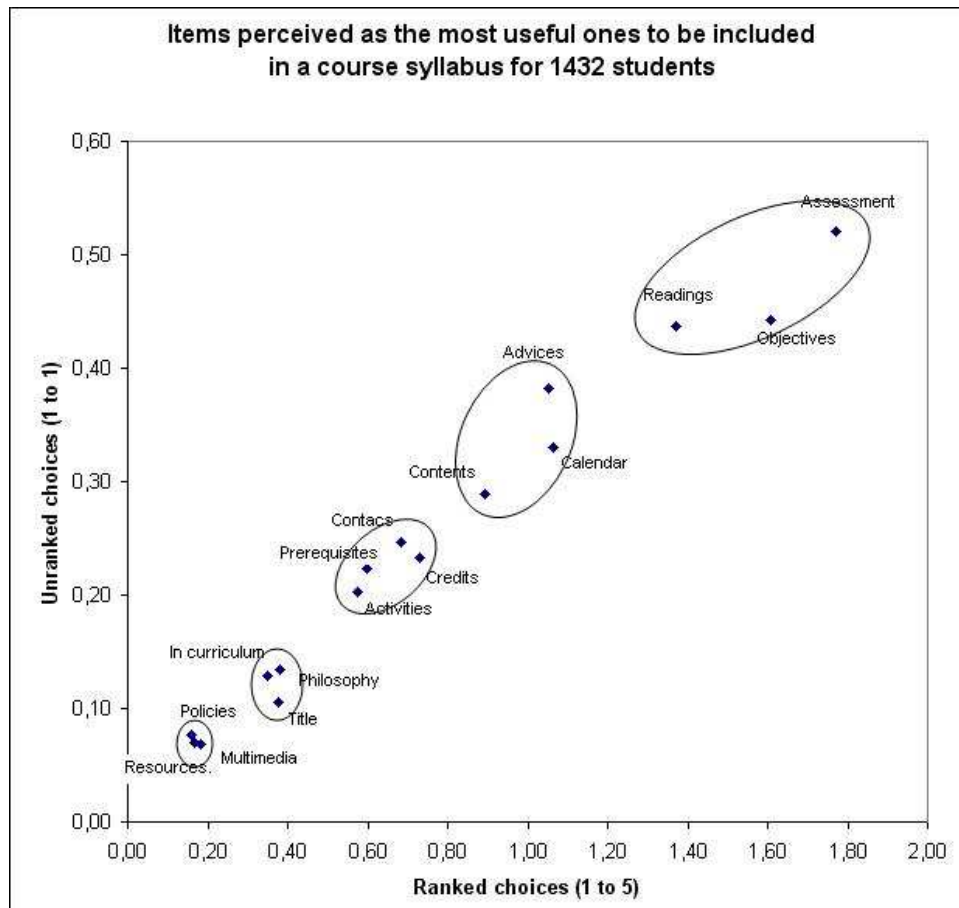
- 1) Course title
- 2) Number of credits
- 3) Contacts
- 4) Learning objectives/outcomes
- 5) Contents
- 6) Learning activities and teaching methods
- 7) Course calendar
- 8) Assessment methods and criteria
- 9) Prerequisites
- 10) Multimedia supports
- 11) Recommended or required readings
- 12) Campus resources and tutoring services
- 13) Teaching philosophy
- 14) How the course fits into the curriculum
- 15) Learning advice
- 16) Ground rules and policies

Participants

960 freshmen and 472 sophomores in 12 different courses from 7 faculties (Law, Medicine, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Sciences, Applied Sciences) at the University of Liège completed the survey. The 1432 students completed the questionnaire on the second day of class (in each course) during the fall of 2008.

Results and discussions

The figure below shows a distribution of the perceived usefulness for the 16 items by all the 1432 respondents in 5 subsets. Being the only group composed of items taking the same order according to the ranked and unranked choices, the first subset represents the “top 3” of the components perceived as the most useful ones : items n°8 (*Assessment methods and criteria*), n°4 (*Learning objectives/outcomes*) and n°11 (*Recommended or required readings*). If those three points are almost equidistant in this successive order on the axis of the ranked choices (intervals of 0.16 between *Assessment* and *Objectives*, and 0.14 between *Objectives* and *Readings*), the item n°8 appears to be nearly equidistant from the other two on the axis of the unranked choice (intervals of 0,079 between *Assessment* and *Objectives*, and 0,084 between *Assessment* and *Readings*).



Subsets of the 16 items according to their levels of perceived usefulness for the 1432 students based on both scales of ranked choices and unranked choices

Assessment

First of all, those results indicate a strong prevalence of the information regarding *Assessment* for the 1432 respondents as a whole, confirming thereby the conclusions of the other surveys. Indeed, in both the pilot and primary studies of Garavalia *et al.* (1999), their several items linked to *Assessment* (*Weights, Paper length, Paper format* in their pilot study ; *Dates of examinations, Statement of required projects/papers, Explanation of how the course grade is computed* in their primary study) reached 3 of the 4 highest positions in their general ranking of the “most important items”. The same conclusion can be drawn from Marcis and Carr’s rankings of the “most attended items” where 3 out of the first 4 scores deal with *Assessment* (*Number of examinations and quizzes, Examination and quiz dates, Due dates of out-of-class assignments*). Considering Becker and Calhoun’s study (1999), using identical scales, the 5 highest scores of their final rankings are related to *Assessment* as well (*Examination or quiz dates, Due dates of assignments, Reading material covered by each exam or quizz, Grading procedures and policies, Type of exams and quizzes*). Two out of the 3 most frequent answers to Zucker’s open-ended question (“the first thing you looked for in the syllabus”, 1999) also deal with *Assessment* (*Exam dates* and *Number of exams* : 37 and 31 quotations). Regarding Smith and Razzouk’s results (1993), *Assignments* and *Grading* appeared to be the most expected pieces of information for their respondents.

Learning objectives/outcomes

The second highest rank reached by item n°4 (*Learning objectives/outcomes*) on the podium of the most useful item to be included in a course syllabus for our 1432 respondents are however more surprising compared to the various rankings obtained by the other researchers.

Indeed, in Garavalia's pilot and primary studies (1999), the only items related to our item n°4 (*General goals, Specific goals/objectives for each topic, and General objectives of the course*) all reached low positions (in the last four choices) in their rankings. In Marcis and Carr's case (2008), their item *Course goals and objectives* only reach the 19th position out of 28 options. This result is very close to Becker and Calhoun's one (1999), their item *Course goals and objectives* only obtaining the 20th general score out of 29. Finally, to Zucker's question of the first thing looked for in the syllabus (1999), only 3.09% of the respondents mentioned the *Course objectives*. In an attempt to explain those differences of rankings regarding this item, we will point out the fact that most of those studies asked their respondents to take a stand (using Likert-type scales) on numerous sub-items related to the same generic elements (like *Assessment, Policies or Contacts*), increasing the risk to conceal some important but "lonely" items (like *Objectives*).

Recommended or required readings

Very close to the *Objectives* item regarding the level of the unranked choices, the third most useful element to be included in a syllabus according to the 1432 students is item n°11, *Recommended or required readings*. Such an interest in this kind of information among those respondents could be partially explained by the lack of a unique format of readings' delivery at the University of Liège. Comparing to the *Objectives* case, this result is more consistent with those from other studies. According to Marcis and Carr's results (2008), 3 items related to this aspect of the *Readings* are variously ranked 9th (*Reading material covered by each examination or quiz*), 22nd (*Where to obtain materials for class - i.e. texts, readings, labs*), and 27th (*Title and authors of textbooks and readings*) on the *most attended* syllabus components' list respectively. Using exactly the same three items, Becker and Calhoun's respondents (1999) ranked them a little higher (notably the first one): 3rd, 17th and 29th. In the same vein, Smith and Razzouk's results (1993), depending upon students' likelihood to remember data from the syllabus, show that 80% of the respondents were able to recall general information about the course and textbook. Unfortunately, both Garavalia's studies (1999) omit to include any item dealing with the *Recommended or required Readings*.

Learning advices

It is also important to highlight the high general score reached by to the item *Learning advices* (4th on the axis of unranked choices, and 5th on the axis of ranked choices) on our own survey. We especially insist on the perceived usefulness of this element since none of the previous studies has reported any mention of this aspect, neither in their items' lists nor in their results. Voluntary or not, this omission is pretty surprising considering the importance given to the "advices", "tips", "hints" and other "suggestions" by many authors promoting the role of the syllabus as a *learning tool* (Collins, 1997 ; Birdsall, 1999 ; Brent & Felder, 1999 ; Spuches, 2001 ; Parkes & Harris, 2002 ; Mandernach, 2003...). And indeed, our results seem to indicate that many students, and among them lots of freshmen, are hoping to receive such a "guiding" syllabus.

Concluding thoughts on the link between trust and the course syllabus

In conclusion, we believe that the perspective (for both an institution or an individual faculty who would intend to collect or use those kind of data) of taking into account the students' point of view about what components should be included in the course syllabus, clearly makes sense in the prospect of enhancing the feeling of trust between students and their teachers. Indeed, if an author like Wasley warns against the detrimental effects that authoritarian syllabus (too legalistic and controlled by faculties) could have on relationships with students

(« documents bloated with legalese and laundry lists of dos and don'ts have turned the teacher-student relationship into an adversarial one », Wasley, 2008, p.2), others like Singham consider that a trust deficiency between teachers and learners even pre-exists and leads to such a syllabus (« it is likely that the authoritarian syllabus is just the visible symptom of a deeper underlying problem, the breakdown of trust in the student-teacher relationship », Singham, 2007, p.52). Consequently, emphasizing that trust and communication are obviously linked, we'll posit that a syllabus approach likely to impact the students' perceptions of control (Harris & Cullen, 2008) can only serve a trusty relationship with their faculty.

Concluding questions

- Have you already been involved in an accreditation review / a faculty review using course syllabi to document the quality? If so, could you describe the efficiency of this technique, as you perceived it?
- Do you think that the opinion of students regarding syllabus items can play a useful role in documenting and increasing the quality of teaching (or a relationship of trust with a faculty)?

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