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How Students Use the Course Syllabus

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Keywords: Syllabus, Student Use; Student Time Management

Introduction

Over the past 15 years, there has emerged a corpus of articles regarding the course syllabus (sometimes called a "course handbook" or "course guide" in countries outside North America). Many of these articles describe best practices in syllabus development and emphasize the functions of a good syllabus. Most regard the syllabus as a contract between instructor and students (see Habanek, 2005; Lyons, Kysilka, & Pawlas, 1999; Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Parkes & Harris, 2002; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). Many provide long lists of content that should be included in the syllabus (Altman & Cashin, 1992; Appleby, 1994; Grunert, 1997; Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Slattery & Carlson, 2005).

Although most older best practices emphasized the contract aspect, more recent work focuses on making syllabi student-centered by providing information that might increase student success. In addition to their function as contracts, syllabi are viewed as devices to communicate with students and provide them with organizational structures and learning tools. Properly written, the syllabus can communicate learning outcomes, how assignments will help students achieve those outcomes, and the responsibilities of both instructor and student in that process (Habanek, 2005). In a similar manner, Bain (2004) indicates that the most successful college teachers create what he refers to as "promising syllabi." Such a syllabus makes a promise to students of what they will learn, invites them to actively

engage in assignments that will allow them to experience the promised learning, and begins an explanation of how students will receive feedback about their learning and progress toward achieving the promise (see also Bain, n.d.). Others note that the syllabus communicates the instructor's "overall tone or personality" (Matejka & Kurke, 1994, p. 2; see also Slattery & Carlson, 2005) and thus provides a basis for students' first impressions of the instructor (Davidson & Ambrose, 1994; Matejka & Kurke, 1994). This syllabus function seems to be a particularly important point for instructors who do online-only classes as well as for those who teach traditional face-to-face classes and put syllabi online before the semester begins. Syllabi can also serve as organizational structures for students when they include a detailed semester schedule with dates and assignments (Habanek, 2005; Slattery & Carlson, 2005) or when they include the course mission, goals, and topics (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). Some (e.g., Habanek, 2005; Parkes and Harris, 2002) view the syllabus as a learning tool and suggest including such things as self-management skills, how much time is required outside of class, study strategies, errors typically made by students, and sources of help (e.g., tutors or learning centers).

Considering the evolution of the syllabus from a fairly simple course outline to a detailed and student-centered learning device, it is somewhat surprising that there is relatively little research evaluating students' reactions to syllabi. Several articles do evaluate students' thoughts about the importance of various parts of the syllabus by asking them to rate how much attention they believe they pay to specific pieces of information. Becker and Calhoon (1999) and Marcis and Carr (2003, 2004) found that students say they attend most to dates of tests or quizzes and to grading policies. Meuschke, Gribbons, and Dixon (2002) asked students about the clarity of different aspects of their syllabi. Most (92%) of the students reported their syllabi contained grading policies and 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the policy was clear about how final grades were calculated. However, only 64% agreed or strongly agreed that the syllabus clearly described how to calculate their grade during the semester. As for due dates, 90 % of Meuschke, et al.'s (2002) students reported that their syllabi contained assignment due dates and that 85% agreed or strongly agreed that their syllabi clearly described those assignments.

Students reported paying the least attention to academic dishonesty policies, textbook information, and basic course information such as course number and credit hours (Becker & Calhoon, 1999; Marcis & Carr, 2003, 2004), withdrawal dates (Becker & Calhoon, 1999; Marcis & Carr, 2003), and course prerequisites (Marcis & Carr, 2003, 2004). Course goals and objectives received a moderate amount of students' attention in the Becker and Calhoon (1999) study, and 85% of Meuschke et al.'s (2002) students reported that course goals and objectives were clearly described in their syllabi. Becker and Calhoon (1999) found that students' attention ratings changed from the beginning to the end of semester, with greater interest at the end of the semester in such things as readings covered by tests/quizzes, types of assignments, schedule of topics, and available support services, and less interest at the end of the semester in such things as academic dishonesty policies and drop dates.

There is some evidence that what is included in the syllabus has the potential to impact students' behaviors. For instance, Perrine and Lisle (1995) looked more closely at reactions to inclusion in the syllabus of a relatively brief statement in which the instructor offers help for students who are having problems in the course. Student participants read two versions of a sample syllabus for a course they were not currently taking, rating their willingness to seek help for several types of classroom difficulties after reading each version. The versions

were identical, with the exception that one ended with the instructor's offer to provide help. Students reported greater willingness to seek the instructor's help when the syllabus included the offer of help than when it did not. However, this study was not designed to determine whether willingness to seek help predicts actual help-seeking behavior.

A few studies looked at students' actual behaviors with respect to the syllabus. For example, at the end of the first class period of the semester, Zucker (1992) asked students to identify the first thing they looked for when they first received the syllabus. The top three responses (made by 16 - 19% of the students) were test dates, number of tests, and course content/topics. The next most common responses, made by only 6 - 7% of respondents, were course requirements, whether or not they had to write a paper, and grading. The short time frame between students' receipt of the syllabus and the reporting of what they looked for in Zucker's study most likely makes the students' reports quite accurate. In a similar study, Smith and Razzouk (1993) asked students what they remembered looking at most frequently in the syllabus, but did so at later points in the semester. Students who were asked to recall in the third week most commonly reported they looked for test dates. Students who were asked to recall in the seventh week most commonly reported they looked at the course schedule. However, regardless of when during the semester the students made their reports, course schedules, assigned readings and chapters, and due dates were among the top five most frequent responses. Smith and Razzouk's students also reported how often they remembered looking at the syllabus during the semester up to that point; the majority reported they did so once a week. Unfortunately, Smith and Razzouk's strategy relied on memory across more extended time periods, which increased the possibility of inaccuracy in students' reports. In addition, because the data were gathered from each class only once, it is difficult to evaluate potential changes in syllabus use over the course of a semester.

In the present study, we address the question of whether or not students keep and actually use their syllabi. We sought to minimize effects of memory by asking students directly when they last looked at the syllabus, and what they looked for. We also sought information about how they generally use a syllabus, and how they use a syllabus in other courses. We were interested in whether syllabus use changed across time, and so we gathered data during six different points in the semester. However, students in each class reported out only twice, once before and once after midterm.

Method

Survey

We administered a survey on syllabus use to students in three sections of General Psychology at a regional campus of a large Midwestern university during the third, fifth, or seventh week of the semester, respectively. We repeated the survey in each section six weeks later (i.e., in the ninth, eleventh, or thirteenth week, respectively). All of these classes met twice a week for 15 weeks.

For the first administration of the survey only, we asked students if and when they had received a paper syllabus in their psychology class. (Although all received paper syllabi, most also had access to an online syllabus.) We also asked whether they had transferred any information from the syllabus to a calendar or planner, and, if so, what information they

transferred. All other items were identical for the two administrations. We asked about what they had done with the original paper syllabus and, if they had kept or replaced it, where it was currently located. We asked how long it had been since they last looked at the syllabus for their psychology course and what information they had looked for at that time. In addition, we asked them where they would first seek information about when the next assignment was due.

To gather information about how they used syllabi in other classes, we asked students how they generally used a syllabus (in any class, not just psychology). We also asked them whether there was another course they were taking for which they relied more heavily on the syllabus than in their psychology course. If they did identify such a course, we asked them why they relied more heavily on that syllabus, what they looked for, and how frequently they looked at it.

Respondents
In the first administration, 112 students responded to the survey: 79 female (70.5%), 31 male (27.7%), and 2 who did not say. The large majority were first year students (67.9%) or sophomores (21.4%). Most (81.2%) were attending school full time. The students ranged in age from 17 to 53, with a mean age of 20.65 ± 5.2 years, a median of 19, and a mode of 18. About 20% of the students would be considered to be non-traditional age (older than 24).

In the second administration, 93 students responded to the survey. The demographic breakdown of the group taking this second survey was very similar to that of the first. Females (69.9%) were again in the majority. First year students (71.0%) and sophomores (16.1%) comprised most of the group. In this administration, fewer (77.4%) reported that they were full-time students, though they were still in the majority. The mean (20.70 ± 4.5 years), median (19 years) and modal (18 years) ages for students in the second administration were the same as in the first. However, in the second administration fewer (12%) of the students could be classified as being of non-traditional age, and the range was more restricted (17 to 35).

Results

Where Syllabus is Kept
All 112 students in the first administration reported that they received a paper syllabus, and all 112 reported that they still had it, even as late as the seventh week of classes. A very large majority (92.9%) said they kept their syllabus in the binder or notebook where they kept their class notes. A few (4.5%) said they kept it in a folder with their other syllabi, and even fewer (2.7%) said they kept it at home.

All 93 students in the second administration (weeks 9 - 13 of classes) reported that they still had their syllabi, although interestingly one reported that he did not know where it was, and one did not answer the question about where it was. Again, most (87.1%) students reported their syllabus was with their class notes.

Use of Personal Calendar or Planner
We asked students in the first administration whether and what kind of information they

transferred from their syllabus to a calendar or planner. Sixty-six (58.9%) of the students reported transferring information from the syllabus to a calendar or planner. Of those, 63 (95.5%) transferred test dates and 53 (84.1%) put in assignment due dates, but only 33 (50%) recorded reading assignments in their planners.

We compared students (in the first administration) who did and did not transfer information to a calendar or planner. Students who transferred information were more likely to be younger (M age = 21.29 ± 5.9) than those who did not (M age = 23.43 ± 8.3, t [236] = 2.3, p = .02). There were no differences in their class standing (first year vs. sophomores and up). Neither were there differences in how long ago they last looked at the syllabus for their psychology course or how many times they looked at the syllabus for the other class they reported on. They did not differ on how many things they looked for when they last looked at their psychology syllabus. There were some differences in what they looked at the syllabus for, however. Those who transferred information to a course planner were far more likely to look for the day's reading assignments than those who did not (55% vs.39%); this may be because only half of those putting information in a planner included information about reading assignments. Students who used a planner were also more likely to look for the next test date than those who did not (51% vs. 37%), despite the fact that almost all of those students reported they had that information in their planner.

Use of the Syllabus Across the Semester

We asked students how long ago it was when they last looked at the syllabus for their psychology course. The results are presented in Table 1. At the first administration, almost half of the students reported they had looked at the syllabus the same day as the class, with nearly all of those students reporting they had looked at it within the last two hours. At the second administration, fewer students reported looking at the syllabus within the past two hours (X^2 [1, N = 204] = 6.98, p < .001) and more students reported they had not looked at the syllabus in the past week (X^2 [1, N = 204] = 4.11, p < .05).

Table1: Frequency of Responses to When Student Last Looked at the General Psychology Syllabus

When Student Last Viewed the Psychology Syllabus	First Administration n = 112		Second Administration n = 92	
	f	%	f	%
0 - 2 hours before class	50_a	44.6	15_c	16.3
More than 2 hours before class, but still the same day	5	4.5	4	4.3
Yesterday	39	34.8	45	48.9
2 days ago	9	8.0	13	14.1
3 - 6 days ago	6	5.4	6	6.5
7 or more days ago	3_a	2.7	9_b	9.8

Note: Frequencies in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at p < .05 (subscripts a and b)

or p < .001 (subscripts a and c).

These data suggest that, as the semester progresses, students are less likely to have looked at the syllabus in the immediate past. To better understand this, we combined the data from the first and second administrations and looked at the relationship between week of administration (third, fifth, seventh, ninth, etc.) and when the students last viewed the syllabus. We found a positive correlation (r_s = .312, p < .001). Closer inspection of the data revealed that a significant shift occurred at Week 7 (about mid-term). The median time since last viewing their syllabus for students surveyed in the third and fifth week of the semester was the same day (more than two hours before class, but still the same day). However, the median time since last viewing their syllabus for students surveyed in the seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth weeks was the day prior.

Use of Syllabus in the Psychology Course
The questionnaire contained a list of items found on a typical syllabus. We asked students to check all of the items that they looked for when they last viewed their General Psychology syllabus. Results are presented in Table 2. More than 60% of students in each administration reported they last looked for whether there was a quiz scheduled for that day's class, which was the most frequently endorsed item. In the first administration, a majority of students also looked for the topic of the day's class and what they were to have read for class. Half said they also looked for information about what homework would be collected. In the second administration, significantly fewer students reported looking for that day's reading assignment (X^2 [1, N = 205] = 4.54, p < .05) or for what homework would be collected that day (X^2 [1, N = 205] = 4.90, p < .05). There were no other significant differences in responses between the first and second administrations.

Table2: Frequency of Items Students Viewed the Last Time they Looked at the Syllabus

Syllabus Item	First Administration n = 112		Second Administration n = 93	
	f	%	f	%
Topic of today's class	64	57.1	38	40.9
What you were to read for today's class	64$_a$	57.1	34$_b$	36.6
What homework would be collected in today's class	56$_a$	50.0	28$_b$	30.1
Whether there was a quiz scheduled for today	70	62.5	56	60.2
When the next test will occur	48	42.9	31	33.3
How to contact the instructor	4	3.6	1	1.1

Grading policy	4	3.6	6	6.5
Information you added to the syllabus	2	1.8	5	5.4

Note: Frequencies in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at p < .05.

To determine whether there was a relationship between when the students last looked at the syllabus and what they looked at, we formed two groups: those who viewed their general psychology syllabus within the past two days (n = 94 for the first administration and n = 65 for the second) and those who last viewed it prior to that (n = 18 for the first administration and n = 28 for the second). We found that those who looked at the syllabus more recently were more likely to have looked at the day's topic, both for the first administration (X^2 [1, N = 112] = 7.55, p < .001) and for the second (X^2 [1, N = 92] = 4.41, p < .05). There were no other significant differences.

We asked students what they would do first if they wanted to know when the next assignment in their psychology class was due. The overwhelming majority of students (101 [90.7%] in the first administration and 76 [81.7%] in the second) said they would look first at their syllabus. Surprisingly, though 53 students in the first administration reported transferring that information to a planner or calendar, only four (7.5%) said they would check their planner first. Two (1.8%) students in the first administration and five (5.4%) students in the second said they would ask a classmate. In both administrations, one student would ask the instructor, and one would wait for the instructor to remind the class of the assignment.

Use of the Syllabus in Other Courses
We asked students to report what they are most likely to look for when they consult a syllabus in any course. The most popular responses in the first administration were "what homework would be collected in the next class" (f = 55, 49.1%), "what to read for the next class" (f = 43, 38.4%), "whether there is a quiz in the next class" (f = 38, 33.9%), and "topic to be covered in the next class" (f = 24, 21.4%). The most common responses in the second administration were "whether there is a quiz in the next class" (f = 38, 40.9%), "what homework would be collected in the next class" (f = 32, 34.4%), "when the next test will be" (f = 22, 23.7%), "the next reading assignment" (f = 19, 20.4%), and "topic to be covered in the next class" (f = 18, 19.4%).

We also asked students if they were taking a course for which they relied more heavily on the syllabus than they did in the psychology course, and why. Sixty-eight students (60.1%) in the first administration and 55 students (61.8%) in the second administration said they did have such a course. English composition, math, and science courses were most commonly cited.

By far the most common reason given for relying more heavily on a syllabus in a different course was that the course had more homework assignments due. Thirty (44.1%) students in the first administration and 24 (43.6%) in the second administration cited this reason. The next most frequent reason given, cited by 13 (19.1%) students in the first administration and 9 (16.4%) students in the second, was that the syllabus in the other course was more detailed. For instance, it listed specific problem sets to be completed or it contained grading criteria for assignments. Less common reasons included that the class

was more difficult, there were more tests in the other course, and that the student cared more about that course (e.g., it was required for their major). A few students said they relied more heavily on the syllabus in a different course because the readings didn't follow a set pattern (e.g., were not in chapter order or only portions of the chapter were assigned).

Although nearly all of those courses met twice a week, most students reported looking at the syllabus more often than that, especially earlier in the semester. Half of the students in the first administration reported looking at the syllabus three or four times per week, while 19 (27.9%) reported looking at it five times per week or more. Only one student in the first administration reported looking at that syllabus once a week or less. In the second administration, however, just 9 (9.7%) of the students looked at it at least five times a week, while 31 (33%) looked at it three to four times per week. Five (9.1%) students reported looking at it once a week or less. Correlating the number of times students looked at the syllabus with week of administration yielded a correlation coefficient that approached significance (r_s = -.173, p = .055), indicating a slight trend toward relying less heavily on the syllabus as the semester progressed.

The students reported what item(s) they tended to look for when they last viewed the syllabus for that course. Those results are presented in Table 3. There were no significant differences in responses between the first and second administration of the survey. For both administrations, the students reported that they tended to look for homework assignments most often and instructor contact information least often.

Table 3: Frequency of Syllabus Items Students Viewed for a Course in Which they Depended More on the Syllabus

Syllabus item	First Administration n = 68		Second Administration n = 55	
	f	%	f	%
Topic of today's class	38	33.9	29	31.2
What you were to read for today's class	47	42.0	28	30.1
What homework would be collected in today's class	55	49.1	37	39.8
Whether there was a quiz scheduled for today's class	41	36.6	22	23.7
When the next test will occur	32	28.6	25	26.9
How to contact the instructor	6	5.4	5	5.4
Grading policy	11	9.8	9	9.7
Information you added to the syllabus	8	7.1	10	10.8

Discussion

There is a faculty perception that students either lose or never look at their syllabi. In fact, faculty who visited a poster session in which we presented preliminary data from this study frequently commented that their students either lost their syllabi or never read it (Becker & Calhoon, 2004). At least one published article presents a method for preventing students from losing their syllabi (Smith, 1993), which one of us used until our institution began using a course management system for posting syllabi online. Despite persistent faculty beliefs that students lose their syllabi, our data indicate this simply is not true. Nearly all of the students in our study, regardless of how late in the semester they were surveyed, reported they still had their syllabus, and a large majority said they kept it nearby with their class notes. Moreover, in both administrations of our survey, a large majority told us they looked at the syllabus in their psychology course either that day or the day before. This was a surprise to us, because we held the popular belief that students routinely disregard their syllabi. Perhaps those few students who come to us begging another copy or proclaiming exemption from some deadline or policy because they "didn't know about it" are more memorable to us faculty members than the large majority of students who do not make such requests. Another possibility arises when we look at our data along with the results of Smith and Razzouk's (1993) study of students' memory for syllabus information. That is, the vast majority of students may well keep and look at their syllabi, but simply have relatively poor memory of all but the basics (i.e., course title, instructor name, credit hours, text title, purpose of project, course number, and number of exams).

Students' use of the syllabus depends both on the content of the syllabus and how far along

in the semester they are. Students reported looking at the syllabus more frequently when a class has a large number of assignments and/or when the syllabus contains important details about those assignments. Instructors who want their students to make use of the syllabus would do well to include this information, as our data indicate students will look for it. Our data also suggest that students look at the syllabus somewhat less frequently as the semester progresses. For their General Psychology course, they were more likely to have looked at the syllabus the day prior to class rather than the day of. For the course in which they relied more heavily on the syllabus, they reported looking at the syllabus less frequently later in the semester than earlier. The most optimistic interpretation of this phenomenon is that the students were becoming more aware that to be properly prepared for class, they needed to look at the syllabus at least a day in advance of class. In any event, even toward the end of the semester, most of our students reported that they were looking at their syllabi at least once a week, which corroborates what Meuschke, et al. (2002) reported.

Our queries into students' use of a personal calendar or planner provided interesting insights into their time management skills. Close to 60% of students reported that they transferred some of the syllabus information, usually test dates and assignment due dates, to their planner. Thus, they appeared to recognize that a planner is a useful time management tool. Younger students were more likely than older students to use a planner, perhaps because of a relatively recent trend of Middle School and High School teachers in our area requiring students to have planners.

Although this is a positive step, our data also suggest that students lack sophistication in using those planners effectively. Only a third of students put information about reading assignments into their planner. In addition, although nearly all students who used a planner entered test dates into it, approximately half of those students still reported that the last thing they had looked for in their syllabus was a test date. In other words, they consulted their syllabus rather than their planner for that information. Similarly, a large percentage of students who used planners also transferred assignment due dates, but only a handful of those individuals said they would check first for that information by looking in their planners.

In addition to their inefficient use of a planner, we found other evidence that our students did not plan effectively. Students, even those who looked at the syllabus less than two hours before class began, most commonly reported looking for the day's topic and readings, and whether or not there was a quiz or homework assignment due that day. This left them little time to actually prepare for class.

Our findings regarding poor time management skills fit with the second author's experiences teaching a one-credit-hour course on "Planning Your Psychology Career" for new psychology majors. In this course, students write about their strengths and weaknesses as a student. In most classes, over half of the students described themselves as having time management difficulties, such as procrastinating, cramming for tests, and running out of time to complete readings or assignments.

Although our data contradict "faculty lore" that students do not look at their syllabi after the first day of class, our data do suggest that students may not use syllabi in ways that faculty might expect. Instructors spend a lot of time developing thoughtful syllabi, including

information they believe is important for their students, yet many believe that the students never look at them. So how do we help students pay more attention to more of the syllabus? One suggestion would be to remind students that the information is in the syllabus at the time in which they need it. For instance, the instructor could tell the students to look at the policy for late assignments and/or the academic dishonesty policy about a week before the first assignment is due. Additional instruction in using a syllabus, especially in looking far enough ahead in the schedule so that the student is prepared for the next class, might also be helpful for students. Finally, instructors might consider replicating portions of our study with their own students. That is, as part of a classroom assessment exercise, an instructor could construct a short questionnaire to see how often the students look at the course syllabus, what they usually look at, and what information might be missing that the student would like to see. This process would demonstrate to students the importance of the syllabus content and how they use it to the instructor. In addition, obtaining feedback from one's students could help the instructor improve the syllabus so that students are better able to make use of it in effective ways.

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