

The Influence of Syllabus Tone on Student Engagement in a Wellness Course
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Abstract. This study examines the impact of changing the tone of a traditional syllabus to make it more learner-centered. The researchers examined a required wellness course that serves over 8,000 students per year at a large, four-year public university in the southern United States. Concerns about student progression through programs and graduation rates had prompted a number of faculty to look into ways to increase these numbers. The investigators changed the tone of the syllabus to determine if a more learner-centered document would increase the chances of students interacting with the syllabus and, in turn, increase the success rates in the course. The results indicated that few students spent sufficient time reading the syllabus to take in all the information regardless of the tone used within the document, so the tone, by itself, did not impact student success.

Keywords: syllabus, tone, learner-centered, online course, student success

Syllabi are frequently provided to students in courses, and many institutions of higher education require that a syllabus be provided to students and then kept on file in the department offering the course. Syllabi are used to impart information to students, including expectations, schedules, due dates, grading policies, and more. Sometimes, they are also used to invite students to learn. However, there is no current consensus about the best way to create syllabi, and there is little research on the topic aside from a handful of studies undertaken in a laboratory environment. These have suggested that a formal, traditional syllabus is less effective at engaging students than is a learner-centered syllabus that creates a welcoming invitation to learning in the course. This study examines the impact in the classroom of changing the tone of a traditional syllabus to make it more learner-centered, attempting to convey to the students an invitation to learn through engagement with the course materials. We also consider the limitations of a learning-centered syllabus if students do not carefully read the document.

Literature Review

As Millennial and younger students are matriculating through higher education, the shift to thinking of college from a consumer standpoint has grown immensely. Millennial students are more likely to view higher education as a venue for gaining credentials in order to find jobs (Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008). If crafted and written intentionally, the syllabus can actually help students become more intentional learners, shifting them away from this idea and opening their minds to the joys and benefits of learning for the sake of learning (Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008).

As stated by Grunert O'Brien, Millis, and Cohen (2008): "The syllabus becomes an invitation to share responsibility for successful learning" (p.22). Helping students feel that they have control over their learning begins with a syllabus that sends a message to students and establishes a "point of connection" between them and their professor (p. 25).

Concerns about student retention, progression and graduation rates are driving new policies at higher education institutions nationwide (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Various aspects of the teaching process are being examined and redesigned to address these concerns. However, much of this research is being conducted in the laboratory setting which does not necessarily translate to success in the classroom. The role of SoTL (the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) is to examine how the theories and methodologies developed in the lab environment play out in the classroom setting (Kern, 2015; Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015). The limited research conducted on syllabus language argues for using inclusive, positive language to better engage students with the course through the document (Canada, 2013; Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Lund Dean & Fornaciari, 2014; Palmer et al., 2016). However, we found that there is a dearth of research concluding whether or not this theory is applicable within the functioning classroom.

In one of the few studies on syllabus effectiveness, Palmer, Wheeler, and Aneece (2006) suggest that the syllabus's "primary function should be as a learning tool, one that is carefully crafted through a systematic course design process" (p. 37). Palmer's team argue that a syllabus that includes detailed information on the course, including detailed course description, explanation of assignments and reasoning behind them, a detailed course calendar, and written in a positive and motivating tone has the potential to enhance student learning and engagement in the course (Palmer et al., 2016). Palmer's team created two separate syllabi for the same course, one traditional and focused on content and the other focused on student learning. They randomly gave a group of sample students one of the two documents to read and then asked them to complete a survey asking them questions about the syllabus. Their results showed that the students who received the learning-focused syllabus had a more positive image of the course, they judged the document to be more in depth (but also difficult to navigate), and they thought the syllabus was more relevant to them personally (Palmer et al., 2016). These results are compelling, but this research only interrogated students who were made to read the syllabus as part of the study and fails to shed light on the impact these syllabi have on students when implemented in a course. The Wellness Syllabus Study attempts to determine whether or not the tone of the syllabus affects student performance when applied in the classroom setting.

According to Grunert O'Brien et al. (2008), the syllabus should accomplish the following goals:

- Convey to your students what matters to you about learning
- Set a tone for learning and how to learn that students will accept
- Send a message about what students can expect from you and the campus community to support their learning during the term.

A search of the limited literature indicated that the syllabus tone could influence students to engage more with the document and even with the course itself. For the purpose of this study, we applied the learner-centered syllabus framework developed by Palmer, Bach, and Streifer (2014). This perspective reflects the belief that a syllabus is not a contract, but an invitation to learn, share the course plan, and establish a relationship between the students, faculty member, and course content. "A well-crafted syllabus can be the beginning of a promise fulfilled and part of the difference between just another course and one that changes lives" (Canada, 2013, p. 37). As students today are entering our courses asking themselves: "Why do I have to take this class?" and "What's in it for me?" it is important for instructors to answer these questions clearly and directly in their syllabus (Canada, 2013). A syllabus serves many purposes, but these can be grouped into three primary categories: motivation, structure, and evidence (Littlefield, 1999 as cited in Ludwig et al., 2011). The syllabus should motivate students to expel effort to excel in the course. It should provide a structure for the course so both student and instructor understand the goals of the course and the way students will go about achieving these goals. Finally, the syllabus provides evidence to the students of what the instructor expects from them, as well as providing evidence to the institution of what the course contains (Ludwig et al., 2011).

Canada (2013) encourages instructors to write their syllabi in a way that fulfills the needs of modern students. This includes using simple and clear language that is understandable to a student who is new to the course material and may not be familiar with disciplinary terms yet. He suggests writing in a friendly tone to enhance students' positive impressions of their instructor while encouraging them that they can be successful in the course (Canada, 2013).

Lund Dean and Fornaciari (2014) argue that instructors are prone to neglect considering how their syllabus signals and communicates expectations and assumptions to students. They advocate for instructors to use "more *authentically* inclusive language and policy construction" in their syllabi in an effort to signal mutual respect to their students (p. 725). Philosophically, these authors see learning as a partnership between teacher and student, in contrast to the traditional hierarchy of professor and students. Developing a positive rapport between professor and students is critical to increasing student performance (Richmond et al., 2016).

According to Harnish and Bridges (2011), the tone of a syllabus has a significant influence over how students view the course and the instructor. Their foundational study shows that when a syllabus is written in a friendly tone the instructor was rated as more approachable and the course was presumed to be less difficult (Harnish & Bridges, 2011). Their research, however, like that of Palmer, Wheeler & Aneece (2016), was completed in a controlled environment in which students were given either a friendly or unfriendly syllabus (covering the exact same information and only changed for tone), told to read the syllabus, and then answer questions about the professor and the course. Though the results of this study encourage a more positive tone be used when writing syllabi, the research falls short in that the

students were made to read the syllabus in a controlled, experimental environment and were given a reward for doing so; the conditions within a classroom or course do not offer the same amount of control.

The importance of maintaining a positive tone when communicating with students is evident in Dickinson's (2017) study on the impact of tone in email communication. In her online course, Dickinson found that being more open about herself personally and adding small "personal touches" to emails resulted in a 17% increase in students' success in the course (Dickinson, 2017). Though Dickinson's study is not focused on the syllabus, it does validate the importance of building personal connections with students, particularly in online courses, through the use of positive tone. Putting forth a supportive and accessible tone in one's syllabus enhances student performance in the course (Tokatli & Kesli, 2009).

While some recommend throwing out the syllabus entirely (Singham, 2007), it is evident that many instructors carefully consider the structure and content of their syllabi and feel it is useful to students (Thompson, 2007). Further, though Thompson claims teachers who include welcoming messages, frame their syllabi in positive language, promote their passion for the course material, and use inclusive language in their syllabi make all learners feel more comfortable in the class, there are no interventional studies to support these assertions, only laboratory-based studies. What is unclear is whether or not students are engaging with the syllabus at various points throughout the course—or at all. As Canada (2013) states, "Even the best syllabus is worthless to the student who never reads it" (p. 41). Additionally, there is not a universally-accepted alternative to providing students with the information they need to succeed in the course.

Thompson (2007) affirms that instructors cannot presume that their students read the syllabus carefully or refer back to it throughout the term. Therefore, many faculty members present the most important information to their students in class, anticipating that otherwise the students will never interact with the syllabus at all. "Capturing students' attention during the presentation is critical because teachers worry students do not read the syllabus," (Thompson, 2007, p. 68). In face-to-face classes, instructors can use technology and presentation skills to emphasize the most important aspects of the syllabus (Thompson, 2007), but online class platforms do not provide the same opportunities to focus attention on specific information contained within the syllabus. In addition, even classroom instructors rarely return to the syllabus multiple times, so it is left to the document itself to entice the students to engage with it throughout the course.

The Syllabus Study

In this study, conducted at a large, four-year public university in the southern United States, we examined a required wellness course that serves over 8,000 students per year, Foundations for Healthy Living, to determine the impact of redesigning the syllabus to make it more learner-centered through the use of more inclusive language. Concerns about student progression through programs, DWFI rates, and graduation rates prompted a number of university faculty across

disciplines to look into ways to improve these numbers. One problem identified was students not submitting work accurately or on time, resulting in lower grades. This was especially noted in the online sections, where students are not forced by an attendance policy to be physically present in the classroom where they can be reminded of assignments due and deadlines imposed, but must instead be self-directed in their acquisition of information and learning and submission of assignments. Because the schedule was included in the syllabus, it became apparent that students were not utilizing this resource effectively.

The Research Team

A collaborative investigation team was formed between four entities to study whether or not a change in the syllabus tone would influence student outcomes: a faculty member from the department delivering the course, the Educational Specialist for Part-Time Faculty Support at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), two graduate students and their advisor from the Department of Statistics and Analytical Sciences, and the analytics director from the publisher that delivers the course e-textbook and course materials.

Description of the Course

The Foundations for Healthy Living course is taught in three formats: face-to-face, fully online, and a hybrid of the two. However, as a result of a paperless initiative on campus, all students utilize an e-text, receive course documents (such as the syllabus and assignments) online, submit their work online, and receive feedback and grades online. Content and course objectives are the same for all formats. The online platform is developed and supported by the e-text publisher through the Canvas Learning Management System. Students are required to view certain documents, including the syllabus and a course orientation, in order to proceed to the course materials.

A traditional, generic syllabus has long been used in all sections because a large number of part-time faculty members teach the course, with individual faculty members adding their own contact information and the specific schedule for assignment due dates within the set dates for each module. This meant it was easy to adjust the syllabus used by any given course section.

Study Design

The learner-centered syllabus designed for this study guided students through the course, beginning with simple steps and working toward more complex tasks. Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory was applied to encourage the students to increase their own self-efficacy through the mastery experience provided by the course design. This scaffolding of learning allowed the students to succeed in low-stakes assignments early in the semester, building their confidence in their own abilities as they completed segments of a comprehensive project that served to illustrate the culmination of their learning in the course. Using the syllabus to model metacognitive strategies not only develops students' self-efficacy in this course, but

they may apply these newly developed skills to subsequent learning experiences (Bandura, 1997; Palmer et al., 2016). Students are responsible for their own learning, but the instructor can support this learning through careful construction of the course syllabus.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The problem of lack of interaction by students with syllabi is a known issue across institutions. In this study we attempted to address the following research questions:

1. Does a learner-centered syllabus written with inclusive language improve student engagement in a required General Education wellness course?
2. Do students who are more engaged with the course materials provided through a learning management system achieve higher grades in the course?

The research hypotheses were:

H1: Students who encountered a learner-centered syllabus with more inclusive language would be more engaged with the course throughout the semester.

H2: Students who are more engaged with the course materials will achieve higher grades in the course.

Method

Participants

Students ($N=1046$) who were enrolled in the required wellness course and met specific criteria were recruited for the study in spring 2017. The students had to be at least 18 years of age and enrolled in one of two sections taught by the same faculty member using the same format (face to face, hybrid, or online). There were a total of 24 sections, taught by 12 faculty members, recruited for the study. A consent form was delivered to all enrolled students through the online learning management system (LMS). Students ($n=479$) enrolled in the sections utilizing the traditional syllabus served as the comparison group; the students ($n=567$) enrolled in the sections utilizing the revised, learner-centered syllabus served as the experimental group.

Procedure

The original, traditional syllabus (see Appendix) was used as a basis for section-specific syllabi by all faculty teaching Foundations for Healthy Living at a large, public, four-year institution of higher education. The course was required of all students except those pursuing three majors with high credit-hour requirements.

The original syllabus was written in traditional, third-person (“the instructor”/“the student”) language and had been previously utilized in its current iteration for 5 semesters. The syllabus was revised to reflect more learner-centered, inclusive language as described by Palmer et al. (2014). The revised syllabus used first and second-person point-of-view. Student engagement with the syllabus was measured by counting the number of times students clicked on the syllabus through the online platform (i.e. LMS). Student engagement with the course was measured using clicks in the course content.

Instructors teaching multiple sections of the course in the same format (two sections in the classroom, online, or hybrid) were asked to use the revised syllabus in one of their sections and the traditional syllabus in the other section. Other than posting the two syllabi and letting the investigators know which section received each version the teaching faculty had no further obligations to the study.

All students enrolled in the 24 sections were prompted to complete the online consent form through the LMS. Until the consent form was completed, the student could not progress further into the course. If a student declined to participate in the study, no data on that student was recorded as part of the study, but by completing the form the student was able to move forward in the course with no penalty. Students could withdraw their consent at any time, with their data being removed upon receipt of notice by the investigators. Contact information for the investigators was provided and could be accessed online throughout the semester. These study and informed consent processes were approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis

No identifying information was gathered from students and all data were aggregated. The data were not examined until after the semester ended and final grades were calculated and reported, to avoid influencing the instructors and the way they taught either section by referencing the syllabi differently in either section. After the close of the grade reporting period, click data (i.e., the number of times students clicked on various pages within the learning management system) was collected by the analytics team at the publisher and delivered directly to the researchers for statistical analysis.

Two separate multivariable linear regression models were employed to examine the relationship between the dependent variables (i.e., number of on-time submissions or final score) and the independent variables collected. This included the number of pages viewed within in the course, the number of syllabus views as well as other variables collected. Multicollinearity between the independent variables was assessed using Pearson’s correlation coefficient. In the case that variables were highly correlated, defined as a correlation greater than $\pm .80$, then a representative variable was selected. The relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable was assessed using backwards selection which considers the significance of the relationships in the presence of the other variables in the model.

Multivariable linear regression models were designed to determine if there was a relationship between the independent variables and the final grade recorded as a percentage. A few of the instructors allowed the final percentage to be greater than 100% so their scores were rescaled by dividing the final percentage by the maximum percentage that was possible. The independent variables considered include the version of the syllabus, the number of syllabus views, the number of page views of the content, participation points awarded to the student, and the number of submissions submitted on time.

Results

The course was delivered in two modalities: 60.32% of students were enrolled in either fully face-to-face or hybrid sections. The other 39.68% of students were enrolled in a fully-online section. Of $N = 1046$, 29.41% of the students were offered extra credit which was a binary variable reflecting the professor's choice to allow extra credit. There were two different versions of the syllabus. Approximately 54.68% of the students received a syllabus written in first person while 45.32% received a syllabus written in third person. Descriptive statistics of the variables are displayed in Table 1. The number of syllabus views was captured by the system and reflect the number of times over the course of the semester that the student examined the syllabus. The mean number of syllabus views is 2.81 ($SD = 2.12$). The number of page views is a similar variable that is captured by the system and represents the number of times the student engaged with any page contained within the system. The mean number of page views is 566.99 ($SD = 200.96$). The online system also captured the number of on time submissions, represented as "On time" in the table below. The mean number of on time submission is 31.7 ($SD = 7.69$). The outcome variable was the scaled final score ($M = 82.92$, $SD = 17.22$).

SAS version 9.4 along with JMP version 12 were used to construct the models. A backward selection technique was employed and the variables with a significant relationship, after adjusting for other variables remaining model, with the outcome variable were retained. The independent variables considered in the model are included in Table 1. The p-value to enter the model was 0.05 while the value to stay in the model was 0.15 or less.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Variables Under Investigation

	Minimum	First Quartile	Median	Third Quartile	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
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Final Score (scaled)	0	79.4	87.78	92.95	100	82.92	17.22
On time	0	30	34	36	47	31.7	7.69
Participation	2	24	28	33	184	30.98	17.2
Page Views	41	445.5	542	675	1696	566.9	200.96
Syllabus Views	1	1	2	3	26	2.18	2.12

We also examined the relationships between the independent variables and the number of documents submitted on time. The independent variable Total Number of Submissions was excluded from the analysis. The resulting model found that for each 100 page views there was 1.74 additional documents submitted on time ($p < 0.001$). The final model explains approximately 20.6% of the variation in the number of assignments submitted on time.

In both models, the number of syllabus views was included as a potential independent variable. There is not sufficient evidence to claim a linear relationship between syllabus clicks and the final score because there were so few syllabus clicks ($p = .1553$). The same is true of the of the dependent variable, On Time Submissions ($p = .6559$).

Discussion

Based on the few available studies of the impact of syllabus language on student engagement (Canada, 2013; Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Lund Dean & Fornaciari, 2014; Palmer et al., 2016), we anticipated that the students enrolled in the learner-centered syllabus group would exhibit higher levels of engagement as measured by their clicks within the platform. However, the data did not support this hypothesis. Syllabus click counts did not prove to be a significant indicator of student engagement, probably because students did not utilize the syllabus after the first, required view.

This brings into question the applicability of lab studies to the classroom environment. Perhaps the Hawthorne effect, which suggests that observation of the participants influences their behavior, or a similar effect had influenced the results of the lab studies (Wickström & Bendix, 2000). Whereas, in our research, students were not being directly observed during their semester-long interactions with the syllabus and course materials. When subjects are made to read a document and answer questions about it, their interaction with that document is required. Conversely, when students are given a syllabus in a course, there is no assurance that students will utilize that document as intended, if at all.

Student engagement with the course materials did produce a statistically significant effect on their course grades. Unsurprisingly, the total clicks by students in the e-text and accompanying course materials was telling, with total page views translating to .044 grade points per click. There was no evidence that this effect was influenced by the syllabus language. While the number of total page clicks was correlated with student grades (i.e., the more clicks, the higher the grade), there were insufficient syllabus clicks for that to be an influencing factor. Because the final model explained only approximately 20.6% of the variation in the number of assignments submitted on time, it would imply that there are many other factors that are related to the ability to submit documents online in a timely fashion.

The most obvious conclusion obtained from the study is that it does not matter how learner-centered the syllabus is if the students do not read it. The click results made it clear that few students, in face-to-face, hybrid, or online courses, were thoroughly reading the syllabus to take in all the information, and even fewer returned to the document to check deadlines or review information.

We hoped that by revising the syllabus to make it more learner-centered, students would be more likely to review the document carefully and return to it throughout the semester to determine the expectations of the course. Although students indicated by clicking a button on an online form that they had fully read and understood the syllabus, student performance did not reflect full understanding. For example, the number of late submissions suggested that they did not notice that late work would not be accepted and would therefore earn a grade of zero. Additional research is recommended to identify more successful ways of increasing student engagement with the syllabus and the course. While a syllabus that conforms to the university's generic template is required in all courses, the investigative team wonders if the traditional syllabus model, in its various forms, has become obsolete. In this study, the positive tone of the syllabus was clearly not enough to entice the student to carefully read the document or to return to it throughout the semester. A more colorful, interactive syllabus that presents information in a format that models the way students encounter information in social media and other online platforms might now be required in order to produce engagement. The researchers are currently completing a follow-up study to investigate this question.

Limitations

Further research on the influence of syllabus language on student engagement is needed due to a large number of confounding variables, some of which were only identified after examining the data. The type of institution and its admission requirements, class size, institutional and faculty cultures, level of course, topic of course, and depth of instructor training might influence the results of this study or future studies into this topic.

While students could have downloaded the syllabus and referred to it outside the platform where they could not be tracked, the average time spent in the syllabus

module reported by the publisher (≤ 30 seconds) does not make downloads likely in the majority of cases.

The university where this study was conducted requires that certain information from the student handbook be inserted into the syllabus verbatim. This information is written in third-person language, so portions of the revised syllabus were still in that format. This information included such items as the University's Academic Honesty, Plagiarism, and Sexual Misconduct policies. This shift in language may have influenced the students who were given the learner-centered version of the syllabus.

The nature of required general education courses leads many students to reject the value of the material covered in the courses as it does not apply directly to their chosen major. This student attitude could have negated the learner-centered language in the syllabus. Therefore, researchers may be interested in conducting further studies on syllabus language and student engagement in major courses and free elective courses, where students self-select for enrollment, to determine if a change in language is more effective in those cases.

Though three different modalities were included in the sample, the difference in delivery method was not accounted for in the data analysis. Students who are in a classroom with a teacher at least part of the time are more likely to receive reminders to submit work promptly, and are more likely to have had the syllabus explained to them. Students who study fully on-line are solely responsible for the information in the syllabus. Examining the variations between delivery modalities would also be recommended for future study.

Conclusion

The hypothesis that students who are more engaged with their course materials provided through a learning management system achieve higher grades in the course was shown to be true. However, increased engagement due to the use of more inclusive language in the writing of the syllabus was not proven. The evidence indicated that the students were not engaging with the syllabus sufficiently to produce a statistically significant result. We believe the value of this study is to highlight the fallacy that learner-centered language will necessarily produce higher levels of engagement in a course. The authors believe that further research is needed to determine if there is a different way to present the syllabus or the material contained in the syllabus in a way that will result in more fully engaged learners.

Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Appendix

Sample language from the online traditional syllabus and the online student-centered syllabus:

Traditional:

Communicate with the professor through the KSU email system. Replies will be sent to student email. The professor will reply within 72 hours. If the professor has not replied within 72 hours, resend through the Kennesaw State University email system. The KSU email is listed above. Do NOT email through D2L.

Revised:

When you have a question, the best way to communicate with me is through the KSU email system, shown above. I will reply to your student email account as soon as possible, but at least within 72 hours. If you have not heard from me within 72 hours, please resend your email or call my office. You may use my KSU email at any time, or email through the Bearface platform. Please do not email through D2L, as I check that system only rarely after the first two weeks of class, and your questions are important to me.