

Creating an Objective-based Syllabus

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What constitutes a good syllabus?

What are the basic elements of a syllabus?

What criteria can we use to evaluate the quality of syllabi?

Two fundamental criteria:

1. It should include *all* the information that students need to have at the beginning of the course.
2. It should include all the information that students need to have *in writing*.

WHAT IS AN OBJECTIVE-BASED SYLLABUS?

(Also known as “*Learning-centered*” Syllabus)

⇒ A reflective exercise that addresses the question: What do students *need* to know in order to derive *maximum* benefit from this educational experience?

⇒ A systematic sharing of knowledge (learning content) and an understanding of how knowledge can be comprehended and shared in different ways.

⇒ A change in focus that affects the students’ role: accepting responsibility for their own learning (this can be difficult for students who have been educated as passive learners).

BASIC GOALS OF AN OBJECTIVE-BASED SYLLABUS

It provides a clear statement of intended learning goals and student learning outcomes.

It answers questions such as:

⇒ What do you want your students to learn? (what are the learning outcomes which you expect from the course?)

⇒ What assignments, classroom activities, and pedagogical approaches will help your students master the identified knowledge, skills, or attitude changes?

⇒ How will you determine that students have accomplished what you set out to teach them? (How will you evaluate their achievements?)

THE MINDSET OF TODAY'S STUDENTS

- ⇒ Computers are not just “technology”
- ⇒ The Internet is better than TV
- ⇒ Reality is no longer “real”
- ⇒ Doing is more important than knowing
- ⇒ Learning resembles Nintendo more than logic
- ⇒ Multitasking is a way of life
- ⇒ Typing is preferred to handwriting
- ⇒ Staying connected is essential
- ⇒ There is zero tolerance for delays
- ⇒ Consumer and creator lines are blurring

(Jason L. Frand, “The Information-Age Mindset: Changes in Students and Implications for Higher Education,” *Educause Review* 35(5): 14-24, Sept.-Oct. 2000.)

IMPLICATIONS OF SUCH A SYLLABUS

- ⇒ Requires substantial reflection and analysis *in the planning stage*.
- ⇒ It includes goals on content, process, and product.
- ⇒ It allows the instructor to engage into a *scholarly* approach to the knowledge and research relating to the course.
- ⇒ It engages students in the *discovery* of knowledge.
- ⇒ Because it is a “learning tool” it reinforces the intentions, roles, attitudes and strategies of the instructor.
- ⇒ It is a “learning contract” .

IMPLICATIONS OF SUCH A SYLLABUS

It asks that you think carefully, asking yourself:

- ⇒ What is my teaching philosophy?
- ⇒ What does it mean to be an educated person in my discipline or field?
- ⇒ How does my course relate to disciplinary and interdisciplinary programs of study?
- ⇒ What are my intentions and purposes for producing and assessing learning?
- ⇒ What is my preferred teaching style?
- ⇒ What choices shall I make about teaching strategies and forms of assessment?
- ⇒ What are the students' diverse needs, interests, and purposes?

BASIC PURPOSES OF A SYLLABUS

- ⇒ Describe the course, its goals, and its objectives.
- ⇒ Describe the structure of the course and its significance within the general program of study (particularly any nontraditional aspects of it that may not be known to the students).
- ⇒ Discuss what mutual obligations students and instructors share.
- ⇒ Provide critical logistical and procedural information about what will happen, when, and where.

HOW DO I BEGIN?

Before you begin writing your syllabus:

PLAN!

PLAN!

PLAN!

PLAN!

PLAN!

PLANNING YOUR SYLLABUS

1. Develop a well-grounded rationale for your course
2. Define and delimit course content
3. Decide on desired learning outcomes and assessment measures
4. Structure your students' active involvement in learning
5. Identify and assemble resources required for active learning.

PLANNING YOUR SYLLABUS

Questions to ask before setting course goals:

- ⇒ Where does your course lead intellectually and practically?
- ⇒ What should students know by the end of the course?
- ⇒ How will students be expected to demonstrate what they have learned?

Examples of goals:

- ⇒ To improve students' problem-solving abilities
- ⇒ To allow them to translate knowledge from one context to another
- ⇒ To improve their communication skills

Objectives

Each goal contains several objectives: they make goals more specific, providing a basic plan for what is to be accomplished by students and how they will be evaluated.

Example: Objectives for Goal:

To improve students' problem-solving abilities

⇒ Improved competence and confidence in problem identification and in using technically sound, analytical approaches to problem-solving.

⇒ Improved ability to exercise judgment and assess options.

⇒ Improved ability to use team approaches to problem-solving **AND** decision-making.

⇒ Improved ability to describe and defend problem analyses and management decisions both orally and in writing.

⇒ Greater understanding of the wide array of considerations and techniques used in problem-solving.

1. Develop a well-grounded rationale for your course

⇒ What are its core scholarly or scientific findings and assumptions?

⇒ What are the main points of arguments? What are the key bodies of evidence?

⇒ What is the course's scope? (How does your course begin? Why does it begin and end where it does?)

⇒ What do you and your students do as the course unfold? (What do you lecture about or lead discussions around?)

⇒ What are the key assignments or student evaluations?

2. Define and delimit course content

⇒ Be clear about what is most worth knowing:

Content that students will be required to know

Content that you will make available to support individual student inquiry or projects

Content that might only be of interest to a student who wants to specialize in this area

⇒ Develop a conceptual framework (theory, theme, controversial issue or movement) which will support major ideas and topics.

⇒ Choose the learning outcomes you value most.

3. Decide on desired learning outcomes and assessment measures

3.1. Examples of learning outcomes, in addition to the conceptual knowledge and technical skills of a discipline or field:

- ⇒ Access and use resources effectively
- ⇒ Work alone and collaborate with others
- ⇒ Understand complex concepts or situations and know how to resolve problems emerging from such complexity
- ⇒ Think and communicate effectively using appropriate means such as writing, speaking, listening, numbers, graphics, digital, multi-media, performance
- ⇒ Clarify personal values, purposes, and goals

3: Decide on desired learning outcomes and assessment measures

⇒ 3.1. Example: Eight principles for designing a course that supports critical thinking as a learning outcome:

- i. Critical thinking is a skill that can be learned; instructors and peers are resources in developing critical skills.
- ii. Problems, questions, or issues are the main point of entry into the subject and a source of motivation for sustained enquiry.
- iii. Successful courses balance the challenge to think critically with support tailored to students' developmental needs.

3: Decide on desired learning outcomes and assessment measures

⇒ 3.1.... critical thinking as a learning outcome (cont):

iv. Courses are assignment-centered rather than text- and lecture-centered. Goals, methods, and evaluation emphasize using content rather than simply acquiring it.

v. Students are required to formulate their ideas in writing or other appropriate means.

vi. Students collaborate to learn and to stretch their thinking, for example, in pair problem solving and small group work.

3. Decide on desired learning outcomes and assessment measures

⇒ 3.1.... critical thinking as a learning outcome (cont):

vii. Courses that teach problem solving skills nurture students' metacognitive abilities.

viii. The developmental needs of students are acknowledged and used as information in the design of the course. Teachers in these courses makes standards explicit and then help students learn how to achieve them.

[Kurfiss (1988) pp. 9-10 of Judith Grunert, *The Course Syllabus*. Boston: Anker, 1997.]

3. Decide on desired learning outcomes and assessment measures

3.2. Norms of an assessment philosophy

⇒ The assessment process is connected to the learner's world, frames of reference, and values.

⇒ Demonstration of learning includes multiple ways to represent knowledge and skills and allows for attainment of outcomes at different points in time.

⇒ Self-assessment is essential to the overall assessment process.

3. Decide on desired learning outcomes and assessment measures

3.1. Examples of assessment :

- ⇒ Products (essays, research reports, projects)
- ⇒ Performance assessments (music, dance, dramatic performance, science lab demonstrations, debates, experiments)
- ⇒ Process-focused assessment (journals, learning logs, reflective statements, oral presentations)

4. Structure your students' active involvement in learning

4.1. Decide what topics are appropriate to what types of student activities and assignments

⇒ Will your course topics tend toward a content or a process orientation?

⇒ Which activities and types of products can involve students in sustained intensive work, both independently and with one another?

⇒ What activities will help students to learn the tools of the discipline or field?

⇒ How can you develop a challenging and supportive course climate that builds student effectiveness, specifically teaches interpersonal and collaborative skills, and develops the capacity for lifelong learning?

4. Structure your students' active involvement in learning

4.2. Decide on a mix of strategies to use to shape basic skills and procedures, present information, guide inquiry, monitor individual and group activities, and support and challenge critical reflection.

The strategies you choose must fit with the outcomes you hope to achieve.

⇒ Examples of general instructional strategies:

Training and coaching

Lecturing and explaining

Inquiry and discovery

Experience and reflection

5. Identify and assemble resources required for active learning.

⇒ Consider ways to include alternate and conflicting perspectives through lectures and panel presentations, demonstrations, books and readings.

⇒ Consider films, videos, maps, libraries, museums, theaters, studios, labs, data bases, sites on the Internet (*Request permission to use copyrighted materials*).

⇒ Assign projects that will tap into students' personal interpretations by challenging them to search for further information or new, even contradictory, points of view that may be relevant to the issues.

⇒ Make arrangements with appropriate individuals, communities, or official bodies for service learning opportunities, if appropriate.

COMPOSING AN OBJECTIVE-BASED SYLLABUS

1. What students want to know:

- ⇒ The purpose of the course
- ⇒ The nature of class sessions
- ⇒ Level of preparation or background necessary to succeed
- ⇒ Required textbooks and supplementary readings
- ⇒ Required supplies
- ⇒ Topics that will be covered
- ⇒ Number and type of tests and assignments
- ⇒ Grading system used
- ⇒ Policies pertaining to attendance, late and/or make-up work.

COMPOSING AN OBJECTIVE-BASED SYLLABUS

2. What an objective-based syllabus includes in addition to this basic information:

⇒ It provides a plan that conveys the logic and organization of the course and provides students with a way to assess your whole course plan, its rationale, activities, policies, and scheduling.

⇒ It clarifies instructional priorities

⇒ It clarifies the mutual responsibilities of both yourself and your students in successfully meeting course goals

⇒ It allows students to achieve some personal control over their learning process.

SAMPLES OF SOME SYLLABUS COMPONENTS

(From: Grunert, Judith. *The Course Syllabus - A Learning Centered Approach*. Boston: Anker, 1997.)

- ⇒ Checklist for syllabus preparation (Grunert p. 81)
- ⇒ Purpose of the Course (Grunert: pp. 30-31)
- ⇒ Course and unit objectives (Grunert: pp. 33-39)
- ⇒ Detailed course calendar (Grunert: pp. 46-48)
- ⇒ Course requirements (Grunert: pp. 48-55)
- ⇒ Evaluation (Grunert: pp. 56-62)
- ⇒ Grading criteria (Grunert: pp. 67-69)
- ⇒ How to study for this course (Grunert: pp. 72-73)