

Ep. 003: Syllabus - Nuts and Bolts

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Avoid inflicting a syllabus snooze-fest upon your students! We continue our discussion from our [last episode](#). This time, we move from a larger perspective to the nuts and bolts of how a syllabus is put together and what needs to be included in it. How do you balance "official" language with the need to offer students a welcoming and accessible introduction to the course?

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me as usual, Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: So, we are continuing our discussion today that we started last time, about syllabi, syllabuses, the syllabus, and we were talking a lot about, about the philosophy of the syllabus, how to make it a more welcoming document, something that students can relate to. But of course, the syllabus also has certain parts is a very particular animal. And there are some must have parts of a syllabus that we wanted to talk about today, and maybe talk a little bit about why are they in there? And what function do they do they perform that kind of meets that overall goal that we were talking about last time of getting students to relate to the syllabus. So what has to be in my syllabus?

CLAIRE: Okay, well, the university has provided some guidance for faculty along these lines. And we this is information that we actually give out at New Faculty Orientation each year, because we want people to know what the basic expectations are. So let me read you a little bit. This is from the faculty responsibility sections of the faculty. I think it's in the Faculty Handbook, it's on the policy page.

JIM: It's part of the university policy.

CLAIRE: Policy.

JIM: All those number dot number dot number. Yeah,

CLAIRE: And this is what the policy page site has to say about syllabi. Faculty should provide students access to a written syllabus printed or electronic in a timely fashion. Normally the first day of class for each course that they teach. The syllabus should include specific course information, office hours, and location, or other means of, oops, or other means of faculty availability, appropriate to the teaching assignment. So in other words, if you're teaching an online course, your writer Office Hours might be something different, right? It should also include objectives of the course, a tentative

assignment and examination schedule, attendance, and other course policies. Faculty members should clearly explain to their students, methods of evaluation for the final grade, faculty should reasonably adhere to the course syllabus, and should announce and explain to the class all changes to the syllabus as far in advance as possible. So, that outlines some things that that you need to do in your syllabus. The university curriculum committee has suggested a sort of a template or an organizational structure for the syllabus, okay. And it says that this format is consonant with the Illinois articulation initiative, submission format, and Illinois state policy. So anyway, that's sort of not much interest, anybody, but that's, that's where it came from.

JIM: So but but I mean, no one's gonna get thrown in jail if they deviate a little bit.

CLAIRE: Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no.

JIM: And we and we will link to the we can on our show page for this episode, we can link to a lot of this great stuff.

CLAIRE: Oh, that'd be great.

JIM: And find at ease.

CLAIRE: Okay. So, the sort of template that is provided by the university curriculum committee suggests that the syllabus should include the department's or school prefix, the course number, the course title, and the number of semester credit hours.

JIM: Yeah. And I mean, that's all that's all pretty common stuff.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: And that's not

CLAIRE: Yeah, contact hours, including any laboratory laboratory or studio hours. So what time What time is the course meeting? Yeah, office hours and location, any prerequisites and notations about any materials fees? It also suggests that you include the catalog description, which I used to think was kind of, you know, really, but actually now, I'm sort of down with that. I like that.

JIM: Why why did why did you change your mind on it?

CLAIRE: Well, I think as I sort of evolved and saw the bigger picture about and started thinking about how students experience their the university as a lot of kind of disjointed classroom experiences, and I think that including the catalog description, at least it reminds them of what they saw when when they signed up for the course and it creates a creates at least the beginnings of a shared vision. For the course, yes, you know, sort of very basic.

JIM: Even if sometimes we must admit, although a lot of effort goes into them. I'm sure the catalog description is not the most scintillating reading in the world.

CLAIRE: Well, you have to describe the course. And I think it's 25 Words or Less.

JIM: Something like that. Right?

CLAIRE: It's I mean, it's really Yeah. So they're, they're usually, they're often sentence fragments, they tend to be more, you know, descriptor descriptors than anything else. But, but I, or maybe prescriptive than anything else. But, but I think it's, you know, but don't only have that

JIM: Right. Right.

CLAIRE: So, the next thing that the university curriculum committee recommends is that you have a course or overview, which is a paragraph or so description of the course. And this is where you can really elaborate to the students about what that course catalog means. And it's also the place that you can talk about the "why" that we were talking about before. So this is, you know, this is that this overview piece is a great place to get students excited about the possibilities of this course, this is the invitation to the feast. I mean, this, this is sort of the, the, the key element of that, right? It's not all of it, but it's really key. The university curriculum committee says that you should also list specific student outcomes as a result, of course, participation. So these are what we call learning objectives, or learning goals or learning outcomes. You know, Different people use different words. And if you're in the College of Ed, you have really specific, you know, specific meanings for all those words. And the rest of us sort of use them interchangeably, but but this is where you're going to tell students basically, what they will know or be able to do as the result of their participation in the course. So that's and and the, the parenthetical after that is including general education outcomes when appropriate, as someone who in her not so distant past, co chaired the taskforce on general education, I would like to say, if you are teaching a general education course, please, please, please indicate on the syllabus that it's a general education course, and indicate on the syllabus, the Gen Ed outcomes that are mapped on to that course. And if you don't know that information, it's available on the Gen Ed.

JIM: website, which is GenEd.IllinoisState.edu.

CLAIRE: There you go. So thank you for that. I did, I couldn't have done that myself.

JIM: That's what I'm here for.

CLAIRE: It is impressive.

JIM: Well, let me let me just add to that I actually taught a Gen Ed course for the first time in a while last fall, that Com to Com 110 course that I teach I and many, many other people because you're like, 80 sections of it a semester now. And I did that. And I put I put in those outcomes. And I found that they mapped that. Well, you're welcome. And, and I found that they not only are they mapped to Gen Ed, but Gen Ed, but they also, I mean, they mesh so well with, with what I was planning to do anyway with the course. So I mean, it's not like it's some, you're putting this, you're putting like fine print in someplace, it can really be part of the body of the document, explain to students what they're what they're going to get out of this.

CLAIRE: And that wasn't happenstance, the people who designed that, right, the people who coordinate that program, right, who designed the outcomes for that course, were well aware of the gen ed outcomes and actually participated some of them and framing them. I think it was the Council for general education a couple of years before the taskforce did a syllabus audit, where they looked at syllabi for Gen Ed courses being caught taught all over campus. And what they discovered was that many of those syllabi, didn't even include the words general education anywhere in general, like education is supposed to be a somewhat coherent, it's a foundational experience. Right? You know, my I would, if it were up to me, I would call it foundational education, because it's really there to provide a foundation for the rest of your education. And actually, for the rest of your life, you should also that, you know, this should all sort of be followed by art should include a topical outline, a tentative schedule, I actually, I like to put my course schedule in a separate document. And...

JIM: Right. I do too, and I'm so glad to hear you say that because I always now when I put it together, it's actually fairly detailed. I have a grid, and days and dates and when assignments are going to be not only when they're due, but when they're going to be assigned because I find that I teach better when I hold myself to the same deadlines that I expect my students to be held to. And, you know, with the caveat that, you know, subject to change with notice

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: So it's okay to have that sort of, I call it a plan of study. So it's okay to have that study plan.

CLAIRE: Yeah. I call it the course schedule.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And if I, in the days that I was handing out a physical syllabus, yeah, I it was the final couple of pages of the syllabus. It was a brand right? Now that, you know, I make materials available electronically. It's a separate document. But it's you know, they're labeled Syllabus and Course Schedule, right? Students get that they know,

JIM: and how granular how deep down? Do you have to drill? Like, do you have to talk about learning outcomes for each day?

CLAIRE: No, no, you don't need to you don't need to do that I, some people probably do I some people do do that. But I think you should have learning outcomes for each day, right? Yes, this is true. As an instructor, you should always go into each class session, knowing what it is that you hope to accomplish that day, or what it is that you hope that your students will accomplish that day. But I don't think you'd have to include that in the in the course schedule, that would make it a fairly lengthy and possibly intimidating document. Mine usually has like three columns, you know, a date, and then it says, work to complete work to complete before class, and then work that will be completed during class or something like that. So or, you know, before class in class, whatever, gotcha. Um, you're also supposed to identify required and optional texts in your syllabus, which is always a good idea. And provide at least a list of major assignments.

So major papers, projects, experiences, things that are going to be going on during the course. And the next thing is to tell students how they're going to be evaluated. So you know, how is their grade going to be arrived at including a grading scale if you're using points, and then policies, course policies, and of course policies that you have, if it happens to be a 300 level course that is so that you can take it for either graduate or undergraduate credit, then you need to have some, some discussion of additional requirements for the graduate students if they're already, right. And this is really important, because this is a, this is a legal thing. Every syllabus needs to include a statement about accommodations, accommodations statement, right. And this, this is just the this statement comes from what used to be known as the Office of Disability Services, and is now known as the Office for Student Access and Accommodation Services. And all it says is, any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Student Access and Accommodation services at 350. Fell Hall 309-438-5853, or visit the website and there's a link to the website. So we can put this statement out there. But that's really important to have this in it's, and it's important not to deviate too much from this or if any, from this language, because there are words there that have legal implications. So reasonable accom... accommodation

JIM: Right, Right.

CLAIRE: Students, each student who has a documented disability, which is another one, you know, we you can't just have a student come to you and say, hi...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: I need extra time to take my test.

JIM: And this is a first this phrase is key. That statement is key, because it's the first step and a very important process and one that as an instructor, I'm very glad that there's a there's an entire department on campus that just handles it. I'm serious, because, you know, I've worked at other institutions where the starting the process was not as easy. Certainly they did a great job taking care of students who had who had those needs to make accommodations. But starting that process being notified that you had a student, your class that had this issue, or had an issue was not easy. And so it is there is a very regimented process that students go through to demonstrate their need. And then to get that help. And then they get are given a card, or now I think, with the name change this this past week, they actually just changed the name to Students and the Student Access and Accommodation Services. Yeah, Monday. They it's going to be electronic, but they will have that then they will have documentation they provide you. So it's a very, it's a very specific process. So it's important that we get the first step right, by putting in our syllabus the right way,

CLAIRE: Right. Yeah. So um, that's really all you have to have.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And I think the key is not what you say, but how you say it.

JIM: Well, and I wanted to talk about that in our last couple of minutes here. I have gone to great pains and I don't think I've been entirely successful yet, but I've gone to great pains not to make the syllabus sound like a legal contract, which I used to write contracts and a former career or to make it sound like a list of commandments. And, and so, what would you suggest that people do to to kind of mitigate that effect?

CLAIRE: Well, it's really important to mitigate that effect, especially when we're talking about our, our course policies. Because there's actual. This is really interesting. There's actually there's research that says that if students perceive the course policies as being sort of, well, you introduced me to the term communication aggression or something like that they like Yeah. But if they if they perceive them as being draconian, or arbitrary, or mean sounding,

JIM: for lack of a better word, discouraging word, I often see research, especially involving, like mobile technology and stuff, encouraging policies, discouraging policies, maybe more laissez faire policies.

CLAIRE: Yeah. And and if if students perceive the policies in that way, they react by pushing back.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And so you, you're setting up a sort of antagonistic relationship with your students from the get go, even though you may might not mean that you may be thinking, Oh, well, this is just what everybody says and how everybody says it. I personally, and a lot of a lot of really good teachers that I know, include in their policies, a rationale for the policy, right. So it doesn't seem just arbitrary or draconian, it's like, you know, this is what you know, when I'm teaching a writing course, it's really important that students come to class prepared with some writing. Because we are going to do things with that writing in class, we're going to, we might share it in a workshop situation, we might share it with a partner, to get revision, we're always going to be doing something and if you don't have it done, then you're kind of sitting on the sidelines while everybody else is moving ahead. And so I try to explain that in my policy about late, you know, I my policy about, you know, timely work, the timely submission of work, late work. So, I think that's, I think that's a good idea. There are a lot of sort of pre crafted policies that you can pick up various places on the web and, and I have a document that pulls a lot of them together that we can link to this podcast, but there's, there's a syllabus statement on mental health resources, which actually is very student, very student friendly language, it starts out, you know, life at college can get very complicated.

JIM: Right, right.

CLAIRE: Um, so that's, you know, that's a great, that's a great policy. And there's a separate one for graduate students sort of making it clear that that counseling services are there for them as well. There's a policy on an on absences due to bereavement. Bereavement.

JIM: And that actually changed I think, last academic year, or maybe the spring before that, about how far they have to travel. And it kind of clarifies that process. So that was

something I remember. Also adding to my syllabus last year, and it's, again, I like it because I don't mind being told what these policies are having to adhere to these policies as an instructor because ultimately, they make the learning easier. And they take you know, they they're, they help students same thing about success week that we, which is when we're planning our teaching for a semester. Now here at Illinois State we have success week, which is the week before final exam week, where we're not supposed to you know, Papa last minute major test your exam or have a major assignment due that wasn't talked about at the beginning of the semester. And I actually put a little blurb about success week in my syllabus.

CLAIRE: Great idea.

JIM: So so we're running out of time. So final thoughts about about the nuts and bolts of a syllabus and how that relates to having a welcoming syllabus for students something that's, that's relatable,

CLAIRE: I think the main thing I would say is that we have there are there are all of these statements from different places, absent due to bereavement, statement for classroom behavior statement for academic integrity, attendance policies, all kinds of things, not all of which are written in student friendly language. What I would suggest is that you have in your syllabus, a personal statement, perhaps a rationale, with a link to the sort of official language statement. So for example, you know, the absence to bereavement policy and this one may be out of date now. Students are eligible for up to five consecutive days not include weekends or holidays? You know, what, if my mom just died? I don't want to read that. Right, right. I mean, I want to know that my professor gets it. And so I might say something in my, you know, in my syllabus, you know, should you have a family... Should you have a death in your family, the university allows you to be absent without penalty for a certain amount of time, the policy exact policies available here, right, and just have a link to the to the policy.

JIM: And again, I think in that particular case, like, the accessibility or the accommodation statement, I think that's a particular process now, because the Dean of Students Office gets involved with that

CLAIRE: there's a whole there's a process you have to go through, you know, and it's really, it's not going to be the first thing they're thinking about. So I think just making it clear that you understand that, that you get it that, you know, bad things happen to good people, and you're going to end you're going to help them work through that. So, you know, in terms of their, their academic release, you know, to, to keep it from derailing them academically, if at all possible. So, I think that's, you know, that's basically it. Yeah,

JIM: well, I think that's a lot. And you know, the ones that hit is a lot in the one and we'll have links to a lot of the stuff that we'll put together as this episode goes out.

CLAIRE: We also have a template for a syllabus, by the way,

JIM: Yes, we'll link to that too.

CLAIRE: Yeah. So that that might be and that would, that just sort of puts things in order.

JIM: Right. Right. So, the the other thought that I had when we were preparing for this episode was and I kind of went back to A Christmas Carol, you know, you and I will sometimes throw out Jacob Marley references to each other and whatnot around the office, especially around the holiday times. And to end poorly paraphrase Dickens, we shouldn't, we shouldn't think about our syllabus one day a year, but but all year round. And I find that if I go through the exercise of really honing my syllabus, then that's a document I use all semester. And I take notes on it.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: So that when I use it again, the next semester, so hopefully, if people are listening to this podcast, this episode, after the semester started, you should already have

CLAIRE: Too late.

JIM: Yeah, well, you should have already done your syllabus.

CLAIRE: In some ways it is too.

JIM: It is too late. But it's not too late. Because this, I think, I think it's an iterative process. And it's an ongoing process that, that we revisit these all the time. And we should because they are so connected to our teaching. It's not just a one and done sort of document that you dust off every semester, right? It's something that has to live and breathe and kind of evolve from semester to semester as you as you do your teaching. So well, Claire, thank you again, as always.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Jim.

JIM: So that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology on our website, that CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Until next time, for all of us here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, I'm Jim Gee. Thanks for Listening.