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"Nothing About Us Without Us": Voice and the Syllabus, A Research Proposal

Institutions of higher education in the United States have numerous, sometimes contradictory, functions: employ individuals, including in roles as administrators, researchers, secretaries, and writers; house athletic teams and thinktanks; perpetuate the status quo in the College of Business and challenge it in the College of Humanities; and educate qualified, willing individuals. Those most dedicated to teaching as an essential mission of post-secondary institutions and most dedicated to improving their crafts care about student success, instructional effectiveness, and ever-changing "best practices." Such educators contrast with the professors who see learning about pedagogy as beneath them because of their content expertise.

Instructors interested in how learning happens have an array of literature to consult. Available information looks at how college students learn differently in online versus face-to-face classrooms and debunks any notion of so-called learning styles (Eyler). Other scholarship works from the psychobiological and psychosocial to consider learning possibilities and limitations beyond a person's control (Bain; Miller). Researchers, often but not always, in the College of Social Science or in the College of Education also investigate success (often measured by grades, retention, and graduation rates) and its correlation with types of assignments and readings, with teaching styles, with class sizes, and with institution type (Knowles, et al.). One emerging, increasingly common practice shifts away from professors assigning grades and replaces it with student self-grading (Blum). Additionally, narratives

describing adventures—and misadventures—with students and in the classroom are more available than ever before in online, highly-reputable publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside HigherEd*, *The Hechinger Report* of Columbia University, and the *#RealCollege Blog* of Temple University. Teaching and learning centers, although underfunded, are increasingly common at colleges, too (Lieberman).

Education is clearly a practice people care about, with an important caveat. Few are concerned with the course syllabus: Research remains limited and has hardly evolved over the decades. Generally, professors and students take the syllabus as something that just *is* and needs no further consideration. Prior research on the syllabus falls into three groups: that which looks at the composition of a syllabus (e.g., its contents and tone), that which discusses controlled experiments to measure impacts of a specific change, and that which is philosophical.

Ken Matejka and Lance B. Kurke write in 1994 encouraging their colleagues to include seemingly basic information in course syllabi: their name, the course name, required readings, and how grades will be calculated. They see the syllabus as a contract, a communication device, a semester plan, and a cognitive map—with all four purposes working together simultaneously. They also encourage instructors to be more cognizant of their syllabi and the messages they send.

In a 2001 article Mary B. Eberly, et al. write about a research study they conducted in 1997 and 1998 that examined the contents of 145 course syllabi from general education courses at Oakland University. They argue that the syllabi examined are woefully lacking in explicit, basic information required by Oakland University (e.g., professor name and office hours, required readings, academic conduct policies, information about technology) and lacking in assignments that encourage engaged learning and writing. They basically beg readers—professors—to make more thoughtful syllabus documents. Eberly, et al. further argue a syllabus

should be revised regularly, be a detailed and thoughtful document (not just a few bullet points), and be something that pulls students into the course.

Almost a decade after Matejka and Kurke's article, Jay Parkes and Mary B. Harris's 2002 article and Cheryl Albers's 2003 article has almost identical advice. All agree that the course syllabi deserve more attention: Professors should spend time writing them, and other people—students and other professors—should give them close readings. Such concerns suggest that the problem of incomplete syllabi found in Eberly, et al.'s research is far from isolated. Parkes and Harris are particularly concerned about course transfer issues and about possible lawsuits due to confusing or missing information in a course syllabus. Parkes and Harris stress that the syllabus must be composed with great care as it is both a contract and a permanent record with implications for students, professors, and institutions. They also argue that the syllabus should include explicit details about how to do well in the class, about course policies, and about campus resources. To the authors, the implications of such student-friendly syllabi are only positive. Albers recognizes that the reception of and uses of such course artifacts is complicated by syllabi serving multiple audiences simultaneously and by the varying levels of academic freedom faculty have. Albers further wants scholars to see the course syllabus as a form of scholarship (and de facto teaching philosophy) that has thoughtful arguments about the relevant field, that teaches methods, that addresses the big pictures, and that needs regular updating.

Another decade later, the literature includes examples of individual professors documenting experiments with how the syllabus is constructed. Charles J. Fornaciari and Kathy Lund Dean writing in 2014 echo early work with on-going concerns about the continued scarcity of literature on the syllabus and about how to make the syllabus more relevant. Like earlier scholars, they also spend time reviewing basic types of syllabi (Fornaciari and Dean define these

as contract, power instrument, signaling device, and collaboration) but also take special time justifying their decision to rethink the syllabus and discussing the fear of administrative wrath. Fornaciari and Dean write about their experiment to build a more comprehensive syllabus. They include their before and after syllabus verbiage about basic administrative matters with brief commentaries. They argue that shifts to "we" and other more inclusive language make for more receptive documents but provide no evidence except one positive student quotation. Susan McWilliams writes in 2015 about her 2013 experiment that effectively goes in the opposite direction of prior research by *not* providing a syllabus but nonetheless giving students more agency. She wanted to take theory about the democratic classroom/syllabus and translate that into praxis. She allowed the eight students in her "American Democracy in Theory and Practice" class to select all the topics, readings, and assignments for the semester beyond two weeks of introductory material. While she reports great success and includes positive quotations from students, she acknowledges that such an approach is not possible for most.

Similar to Eberly, et al., Logan E. Gin, et al. examined ninety-two biology syllabi from 2019 to get cumulative data on what content is indeed included in these documents. In their 2021 article, they report finding wide variations, just like their predecessors. Gin, et al. advocate for longer syllabi that include as many specific details about the course and about campus resources as possible. Gin, et al. also argue that the course syllabus is an important tool in acculturating students with what they deem "cultural capital" within the world of higher education and that syllabi can and should promote inclusivity.

The second category of research examines the syllabus in laboratory conditions; two examples follow from researchers writing in 2011 and in 2020, respectively. As psychologists, Harnish and Bridges wanted to merge research focused on perception and on pedagogy to

understand when and how learning does and does not happen in the college classroom. They surveyed 172 students in Introduction to Psychology to understand how "tone" impacts student perception of their professor, the syllabus, and the curriculum generally. Harnish and Bridges divided students into two groups. One group received an example syllabus written in a "warm tone"; the other group received the same basic example but written in a "cold tone." Their quantitative survey results conclusively show that "tone" *does* impact student perceptions. This study does not measure any associated learning or engagement but assumes positive correlations between a friendly tone and productive, engaged learning.

Overman, et al. are an interdisciplinary team of researchers who set out with an assumption that students do not retain what they read in course syllabi. To measure retention, they gave fifty-six psychology students a two-page mock literature syllabus. Half received a text-only version; half received a version with the addition of color, graphs, and varying fonts. Software tracked participants' eye movements. After reading the syllabus, Overman et al. immediately gave participants a test to see what they remembered from the syllabus. Based on their results, these researchers argue that the format of the syllabus does not impact students.

Two monographs about the syllabus, from 2018 and 2020, respectively, deserve comment and account for the third major category. Christine Harrington and Melissa Thomas provide a book-length synthesis and rearticulation of previous research with the addition of learning theory. They give detailed recommendations for what a syllabus should include, and they advocate for a kind of professionalized, standardized syllabus. They even provide a rubric so readers can grade syllabi. In contrast, William Germano and Kit Nicholls's book inspires and demands that readers think philosophically—about course time, about reading lists, about the accumulation of knowledge, about the danger of grades, and about every other aspect of a course

that comes up when visiting the syllabus. They argue that the syllabus should be a purposeful, living constitution-like document and the start of student-centered learning experiences for all.

Two additional recent works merit passing attention. Cynthia Nichols's "Pedagogy and the Secret Syllabus" and Sonya Huber's "Shadow Syllabus": the first a nine-stanza poem and the second forty-two bullet points with commentary. Both aim to demystify learning, to parody how seriously they (and other professors) take the syllabus, and to expose the hidden curriculum.

Scholarship on the syllabus mostly remains limited to intragroup conversations and debates about what the syllabus should and should not include, to the specific tone(s) used, to brief laboratory experiments, or recently, to the corresponding history and philosophy. Collectively, existing scholarship recognizes that the syllabus is one of the first introductions a student has to a given class and can serve to intimidate or welcome people into a new class and needs to be thoughtfully detailed, but this research does not emphasize the voice of students. When student voices do approach inclusion, they are almost exclusively in the form of formulas, numbers, percentages, and ratios—abstract to the non-statistician—from controlled experiments. Research about the syllabus—a document that is ultimately for students—is about students without students. The same can almost be said for professors, except professors typically have more opportunities to publish. Further, whereas prior scholars have made arguments about what the syllabus should do, I am interested in what the syllabus *does*. This proposed study is motivated by thinking about the relationship between syllabi and students, by considering the true purposes and possibilities of course syllabi, and by wanting syllabi to receive much more attention as important texts worthy of literary, rhetorical analysis. Specifically, this project seeks working answers to two underexplored questions related to reception: What impacts do course syllabi have on undergraduate learning in the United States? What makes for a more effective

syllabus? This study will use actual students and actual professors in actual classes. It should be acknowledged that a long fascination with course syllabi underscores this study.

Such research is always worthwhile on its own. But, more specifically and practically, every college course has a syllabus. Syllabi say much about the people who write them and who read them. With approximately 20 million pupils currently enrolling in the nation's colleges and universities each year, millions of students are receiving millions of syllabus documents from their professors every semester ("Fast Facts"; St. Amour). Thus, there is a clear clarion call for research: The syllabus impacts every class, every student, every professor in on-going tangible and intangible ways, and there is always room for more effective syllabi and more effective teaching. We especially need data directly from students, students who are increasingly paying abhorrent amounts for their undergraduate degree while often working one or two jobs. The benefits of the study promise new understandings of how students interact with the syllabus as a genre, and these new understandings should result in improved syllabi and in turn, increased student success. Beyond students and professors, increased classroom learning, increased GPAs, and increased graduation rates will attract the ears and eyes of administrators, politicians (at state-funded school), and others mindful of the purse.

The proposed research is ambitious and will take at least an entire semester to collect the data and then at least a few months to analyze the data. It will certainly require approval from the Institutional Review Boards at Arizona State University and at The University of Houston given the use of activities, interviews, and surveys—all have zero associated risks to participants. The study will involve two groups, students and professors, from the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at The University of Houston. In a typical Fall or Spring semester, there are approximately twenty-five sections of Introduction to Women's Studies, a sophomore-

level, core curriculum class, with approximately ten-to-thirteen individual professors teaching these sections. (I teach four or five of these each semester.) Each section has thirty students. This program grants each professor complete control over the curriculum and the syllabus. The result is that each professor's syllabus and resulting class is entirely different. The study will involve three parts, all parts focused on qualitative data; although, programs such as Voyant Tools will be used to help find patterns. Rhetorical analysis and narrative analysis will be used to analyze the cumulative results from primary data. Student demographic data will not be tracked for purposes of this study. Analysis and questions will be of the cultural/social construction variety.

In the first part, students in each section of Introduction to Women's Studies will complete a syllabus annotation activity the first week of class. The syllabus for each section will be placed in an online Microsoft Word file that allows collaborative commenting. Each student will be informed a research study is happening and will complete informed consent paperwork. Then, students will be asked to make at least five annotations in the syllabus by highlighting information they find interesting, surprising, or confusing and then leaving thoughts about their highlights by using the comment function. This is important to encourage early and direct engagement with the syllabus and to get impressions of how students interpret the syllabus.

In the second part, this project will make use of semi-structured group interviews toward the end of the semester, sixty-to-ninety minutes in duration. Students and professors are the key on-the-ground players when it comes to the syllabus and what happens in the classroom. Professors will be interviewed in groups of four or five at a mutually agreed upon time. Students will also be interviewed in groups of four or five, possibly at mutually agreed upon times, possibly during a class session pending availability of rooms and research assistants. Interviewing professors and students separately is important to allow space of increased

openness. I personally will conduct the interviews with other professors. Trained student research assistants will conduct the interviews with other students to promote openness. Pending COVID-19 conditions, at least some interviews will be conducted through Zoom. Given that what people wear can impact perception—for example, people see pink as less confident and blue as more assertive—interviewers will wear white shirts and black pants or an appropriate equivalent (Fine 114-115). Prior to interviews commencing, participants will complete additional informed consent paperwork, including confirmation that they are sober and at least eighteen years old. For example, students will be assured any comments they make will not impact their grades. Group interviews will be video recorded and archived. The video recording will be used to make a transcript of the incurring conversations. Professors and students will be asked already-established questions to generate conversation aimed at rhetorical analysis (Pegoda).

In the third part, participants will complete anonymous, open-ended survey questions specifically about the syllabus. Microsoft Forms will be used to administer the survey, and the survey should take no more than one hour, with most taking thirty minutes. Questions will be created, in part, based on theme emerging from the group conversations. The purpose of individual responses at this stage is to get more specific information, given the added layer of anonymity and given that participants will already be primed for thinking further about the syllabus. Students and professors will also have an opportunity to share thoughts that come to mind after group conversations conclude. And importantly, while some might complete the survey in a campus office or dorm, by being away from the immediate presence of a classroom or researcher, participants will unconsciously disclose less filtered thoughts.

The research proposed here should prove interesting to those invested in an always-improving pedagogy. Students always have unpredictable and insightful observations, so what

we will know after this study remains to be seen, but we will know more than presently. It is likely that students 'see' the syllabus in very different ways from our assumptions. Also likely is that syllabi do contain clauses, policies, and words for which students either do not understand or do not fully appreciate given the embedded meanings, and such could disprove arguments for longer syllabi and arguments that syllabi help make informed citizens of the campus. Working from the vein that what people do carries more weight than what people say (or write), I suspect that ultimately the tone of a syllabus will have little significance other than perhaps for students who disengage at the beginning of the semester because of strict wording. Professors too are unpredictable and defensive creatures. Most professors have probably not really thought about the details of their syllabi, what everything really means, and the related rhetorical implications.

No shortage of research questions about the syllabus and its impact on education in the U.S. will remain for as long as they exist as a genre. What are the impacts of using a syllabus quiz? How do syllabi and impacts vary by course type (e.g., dual credit, lower vision, upper division, professional graduate, academic graduate), by course subject (e.g., business, humanities, physics, sign language), by demographic group (e.g., age, class, country-of-origin, disability, gender, sexuality), and by institution type (e.g., community college, state institution, R1, ivy league, for-profit)? What are the consequences of requiring professors to use a university- or department-created template for a syllabus? What are the consequences of requiring professors to use a canned syllabus? What impact does syllabus length have? Will professors ever actually make regular changes to their syllabi? What more can we do to change the dictum from Germano and Nicholls that "the syllabus conceals much" (115)? The aforementioned questions will certainly need both quantitative and qualitative data, primary and secondary data. Further questions will certain emerge based on the findings of this study.

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