The Power of the Syllabus: A Learner-Centered Approach

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Agenda

- Introductions and Workshop Expectations
- What Does it Mean to Be Learner-Centered?
- What is the Purpose of a Syllabus?
- Designing a Syllabus for Today's Classroom
  - Course Information
  - Instructor Information
  - Course Description
  - Learning Outcomes
  - Method(s) of Evaluation
  - Course Calendar or Schedule
  - Course policies
- Additional Resources
Guidelines for Participation

- Be engaged.
- Ask questions at any time.
- Keep comments brief and to the point.
- Make notes on unanswered questions for discussion afterward.
Introductions and Workshop Expectations

A few questions to get to know you:
- How many years have you been teaching?
  - 1-3 years, 3-5 years, 5 or more...
- What college are you in?
- What are your expectations for this workshop?
What Does it Mean to Be Learner-Centered?

- “A learner-centered approach to college education asks you to consider how each and every aspect of your course can effectively support student learning.” (Grunert, 1997)
- “A learning-centered syllabus requires that you shift from what you, the instructor, are going to cover in your course to a concern for what information and tools you can provide for your students to promote learning and intellectual development”
What Does it Mean to Be Learner-Centered?

The instructor:
✓ perceives learning as a partnership with students
✓ becomes acquainted with students’ current knowledge of the subject matter
✓ becomes acquainted with students learning styles
✓ becomes acquainted with students learning goals for the course
What do we know about today’s college student?

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGCJ46vyR9o
What Does it Mean to Be Learner-Centered?

The instructor:

✓ uses a variety of instructional approaches based upon multiple-intelligences theory and practice
e.g. lecture, cooperative learning, small group
discussion and problem-solving, kinesthetic activity,
group and individual journaling

✓ assumes ultimate responsibility for the learning experience
✓ receives and incorporates feedback from students
What Does it Mean to Be Learner-Centered?

The student:

✓ perceives the learning as a partnership with the instructor and fellow students
✓ communicates their current knowledge of the subject matter
✓ reflects on and communicates their learning style
✓ becomes acquainted with the instructor’s learning goals for the course and communicates their own
What Does it Mean to Be Learner-Centered?

The student:

✓ is an active participant in all planned instructional approaches
  e.g. lecture, cooperative learning, small group discussion and problem-solving, kinesthetic activity, group and individual journaling

✓ assumes ultimate responsibility for their own learning

✓ provides feedback to the instructor
The Syllabus is...

- the most important document instructors give to students.
- the instructor's first opportunity to introduce students to a learner-centered paradigm.
- a valuable resource for students throughout the duration of a course.
What is the Purpose of a Syllabus? *

- A contract between the instructor and students
- A central reference and a communication device for students
- An effective planning document for both the instructor and students
- A reference guide for you and for other instructors

* Adapted from http://ets.tlt.psu.edu/learningdesign/syllabus
A Contract

- The syllabus represents an agreement between you and your students.

- It must state your policies explicitly to be enforceable. (Consider seriously the policies you want to enforce.)

- By remaining in the class the student consents to the requirements in the syllabus.
A Central Reference and Communication Device

- The syllabus provides the opportunity to anticipate and respond to student questions and to establish a tone for the course.

- Make your plan crystal clear by avoiding misleading language.
WHAT SURPRISES, MISUNDERSTANDINGS, OR FRICTIONS CAN ARISE FROM A POORLY DESIGNED SYLLABUS?

“You didn't announce that was due today!”
“I didn’t think this would count towards my final grade.”
“We have a quiz today???”
“Is this going to be on the final exam?”
“Could I do something for extra credit to bring up my grade?”
“Why are we doing group work? I prefer to work on my own.”
“I had to miss class last week. Did I miss anything important?” or “How can I make up the work?”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HEIVBCr450&feature=related
A Plan of Action

- An overall plan of action for the quarter
  - Course mission or purpose
  - Your educational philosophy
  - Course strategy
  - Course goals

NOTE: Make sure your syllabus is flexible enough to fairly exercise your discretion in unexpected situations.
What to Include in a Syllabus in a Learner-Centered Course

- Course information
  - Course title, number, section
  - Year and quarter (and for AY 2013 semester!)
  - Number of credits
  - Class times and locations
  - Prerequisites, if any

- Instructor information
  - Instructor name and title
  - Office location and office hours
  - Contact information (be sure to let students know how you prefer to be contacted)
Course Description

This section:

- Provides students with an overview of the course
- Should provide an explanation of how the course will be conducted
Learning Outcomes (focus is on the learner)

- Focus on learner’s behavior that is to be changed
- Serve as guidelines for content, instruction, and evaluation
- Identify specifically what should be learned
- Convey to learners exactly what is to be accomplished
- Should be observable, measurable, and able to be demonstrated*

*Adapted from From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education. By Robert B. Barr and John Tagg
Examples of Learning Outcomes (check with your department)

- Students will be able
  - to identify...
  - to explain...
  - to describe...
  - to analyze...
  - to apply...
  - to solve...
  - to prepare...
Course Requirements

- Attendance
  - (Will you grade for attendance? If yes, be explicit how that will work.)
- Readings/textbooks
- Group work
- Class participation
- Required materials or supplies
Course Policies

- Extra credit
- Cell phones and lap tops
- Academic dishonesty*
  - Cheating
  - Plagiarism
  - Copyright infringement
- Recording or video taping class

Include
- RIT Statement on Reasonable Accommodations

* You can find RIT's policy at: http://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/policiesmanual/sectionD/D8.html
Course Calendar/Schedule

- Your syllabus should include a daily or weekly schedule for the entire quarter.
- Keeps students well informed about topics of each class.
- Indicate that the schedule is tentative - this will give you some flexibility to make needed changes.
  - If you do make changes make sure they are clearly communicated, preferably in writing.
- Developing a schedule helps you organize your course.
Evaluation

○ Students need to know
  - how their progress will be assessed.
  - how their work will be evaluated.
  - how grades will be assigned.
  - how their final grade will be determined.

○ Avoid complicated grading schemes.
○ Give students adequate feedback on their work.
○ Consider peer evaluation.
How to Use the Syllabus

- Students may not know how to use your syllabus effectively.

- During the first class meeting:
  - Go over the syllabus – orient students to its content, form, and uses
  - Explain how they may use the syllabus throughout the course
In Conclusion...

“The traditional syllabus is primarily a source of information... the learner-centered syllabus can be an important learning tool that will reinforce the intentions, roles, attitudes, and strategies that you will use to promote active, purposeful, effective learning.” (Gurnert, 1997)
References and Additional Resources

- There are numerous online resources that can help you design your learner-centered syllabus, such as 4Faculty.org http://www.4faculty.org/Demo/read2_main.htm

- Other resources I have found helpful:
Have a great year!