

Preparing the Course Syllabus

The traditional and most common elements in a syllabus include the following:

Course Description

Usually the description that appears in the catalogue . . . however, the description could be designed to describe special features of the course as it will be taught. This statement may also be called the Course Purpose.

Course Objectives

These are more or less precise statements that indicate what learners can expect from the course. Traditionally, the teacher fashions that objectives. We have largely come out of the era where behavioral or measurable objectives were required. Measurable objectives were required for the following reasons:

1. Teachers have to be more responsible in thinking through what it is they are actually teaching (i.e., what it is students should learn from the course).
2. There has to be more precise ways to assess learning (i.e., how is the teacher to know that the student has, in fact, learned?). Students have a right to know more precisely what they will learn and how their learning will be measured or tested.

However,

1. Focusing on measurable objectives may cause the teacher to miss or underemphasize the non-measurable aspects of a course. Restricting objectives to those that are behavioural or measurable may force the teacher to emphasize (and test) the more trivial or non-essential elements of a course.
2. Focusing on teacher-defined measurable objectives prohibits input from learners.

Course Outline

An outline is used to provide an overview of course content. An outline can show how the various parts of the course relate to one another. The teacher may outline the content of the course and include questions, problems, themes, readings, additional references, etc. in each section. Subject matter may be outlined according to the class period or week it will be presented. Or, the subject matter may simply be outlined without reference to class periods. A fixed outline, prepared in advance may provide an "advance organizer" or it may restrict the effectiveness of a course.

Course Format

This section may be included in the "syllabus" to describe any unique features of selected class periods, or the total course design. Questions related to format include: Does the course consist of static or given knowledge? flowing ideas? a succession of principles? key ideas? processes? people? needs?

Learning Assignments

The tendency is to use the same type of assignments in all courses (reading, reading reports, term papers). Other assignments can include written research projects, observation and report,

interviews, comparative reports on pertinent literature, debate, preparation of an article for publication, preparation of a workshop or a presentation for a committee, analysis and recommendations, problem solving, production of a play, video, or slide series, development of a series of overhead transparencies for presentation. . .

Evaluative Methods

Usually the number and/or type of test is included in this section (mid term, final examination, weekly quizzes). Testing and grading is probably the least reliable element of teaching and continues to be characterized as objective (multiple choice, true/false, matching, fill in the blanks, short answer) and subjective (essay, projects).

Selected Bibliography or Reference List

Different approaches are possible. The teacher may give the students a selected bibliography of books and articles that will be used in the course; provide a more complete bibliography of sources pertinent to the subject area; teach the students how to compile their own bibliography--perhaps as the basis for a research project. Sometimes it is wise not to append a reference list to encourage students to create their own.

Another Way of Looking at the Same Process . . .

(See the latest edition of George Posner and Alan Rudnitsky. *Course Design*. Longman.)

1. Determine the dominant rationale for the course. Why should someone take this course? A rationale often reflects teacher values and biases, approach to the subject matter, world view, and so on. How important is it that learners understand the rationale? The rationale might include one or more central questions that illustrate the rationale for the course. Obviously, the more questions that have to be answered, the less focused the course.
2. The rationale and the questions are often reflected in a Purpose statement. However, it is more likely that a course will have an orientation (or combination of orientations)--a "flavor." The orientation or "flavor" affects the design of the course, methods used in teaching, assignments given, and the type of testing used. For example:

Inquiry. Exploring the meaning and significance of the subject matter and/or events; understanding the relationships between ideas and concepts; suggesting implications, draw conclusions. Working with and/or developing criteria and principles to assess situations, examine literature, evaluate personal preferences or positions, and so on.

Appreciation. Developing personal preferences for elements of the subject matter. Examining criteria driving this appreciation.

Problem Solving Learning how to recognize and resolve problems, develop guidelines and a framework for decision-making or interpretation.

Decision Making. Providing/developing information and frameworks on which to base

decisions.

Skill. Developing and/or practicing skills in research, ministry, communication, and so on.

Personal Growth. Defining personal goals, evaluating behavior, attitudes, and so on.

3. Make a list of the general ideas that will comprise the course.
4. Using the rationale, purpose/orientation, and the list of ideas as a tangible base, develop a tentative course outline.
5. Identify learning outcomes--statements that identify what the student will learn and experience as a result of the course. Identify some of what the students know, or believe, or desire from the course. There are three areas that can be touched through the teaching/learning process: the Cognitive (knowledge and understanding), the Affective (attitudes, beliefs, values) and Skills. For each course, list appropriate outcomes in each category. An outcome is something the student will learn--whether that is a bit of knowledge, a way thinking, a skill or methodology. Once these outcomes are defined, learning tasks, learning approaches, procedures, and formats need to be determined.

The number and type of outcomes selected are determined by such factors as knowledge of the subject, teaching experience, the size of the class, the experience of the students, available resources, input from others who have taught the same course, teaching assistance available, classroom environment, time available for preparation, number of class hours. Sometimes the teacher's "gut feeling" about a course may not be reflected in the course description, and may not even surface in the list of outcomes.

Outcomes may not be listed on the syllabus in order to allow greater flexibility. Or they may be grouped into 3-5 broad statements of intent that reflect the subject matter and purpose for the course. These statements of intent could be used as a basis for discussion on the first day of the course. In this way statements of intent may be modified (to reflect their background experience or prior knowledge, or lack thereof, of the subject).

6. Determine the units for the course. A unit is an appropriate "curriculum chunk" that is manageable in scope. A unit is typically a coherent whole (the grouping of subject matter elements). High priority outcomes can be included in more than one unit. Units can be clustered around themes, problems, desired skills, instructional method, the medium (e.g., book, film), content areas, concepts, chronology, cause and effect, and so on. Once the units have been designed, they can then be sequenced in the order most appropriate to the course.

Fine Tuning the Course Design

Areas that require continued thinking and development are include the following:

1. The range of formats that can be used in the design of a course. For example, competency- based instruction; self-paced, individualized instruction; discovery learning,

- seminar; collaborative learning.
2. The variety of teaching approaches that can be used in class sessions. Search databases under headings such as adult learning, college teaching, higher education for teaching and learning ideas.
 3. The variety of testing styles available. Search databases under the headings of testing, evaluation, and grading.
 4. The nature of adult learning.

Assume that the syllabus is a contract between the instructor and students. If the course contains potential ambiguities or areas which may result in student reaction if changed (e.g., evaluation measures), add a statement to the syllabus that preserves the right to change elements in a reasonable manner. For example, “The instructor reserves to the right to change the format of learning assignments, evaluation measures, and class format if input and/or experience of the participants warrants it.”