

How to Make your Syllabus more Learner-Centered

Once completed, we will take it to: [http://wiki.ubc.ca/Syllabus_Design_\(Teaching_and_Learning\)](http://wiki.ubc.ca/Syllabus_Design_(Teaching_and_Learning))

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The syllabus is an important document which contains key information about a course. By reading the syllabus, students will get a sense about the course, and, at the same time, they will also get an impression of the instructor. For example, a well-organized, comprehensive, and clearly written syllabus will give a positive impression on students. Considering this is the first communication that you will have with your students, why not we using more effective tone to create a warm and positive learning community from the beginning?

Syllabus template typically lists key elements that are essential to include in a course syllabus. However, it seldom provides guidance on how to make the syllabus set the right tone, also known as learner-centered syllabus.

Note. This resource assumes that you already know what the syllabus is, and is written for those who want to make their syllabus learner-centered.

On this portal, we will explore the characteristics and benefits of developing an effective syllabus.

After completing this resource, you will learn how to:

- list essential items that need to be included in a syllabus.
- explain the purposes and benefits of a learner-centered syllabus, from both the student and instructor's perspective.
- identify at least 5 strategies for learner-centered syllabus.
- take the information from this session and create an updated learner-centred syllabus.

1. What is Syllabus at UBC?

At the end of your course design process, you will compile course-related key information into a syllabus. At its most basic level, it communicates what the course is about, what the course requirements will be and how students will be assessed.

According to guideline from the Senate [add link], a syllabus should include:

https://senate.ubc.ca/sites/senate.ubc.ca/files/downloads/va_H_Syllabus_Template_Example.pdf

- Course code, Number, Credit Value, and Title
- Course Objectives
- Learning Outcomes
- Course Format
- Course Requirements
- Assessment, Evaluation, and Grading
- Required and Recommended Readings
- Course Schedule
- Academic Integrity

A course syllabus is often viewed as a very technical document; some may even view it as a 'contract' between the instructors and the students (Bart, 2015). However, an effective syllabus can help build connections and provide support in students' academic success.

2. Why Construct Learner-Centred Syllabus

An effective syllabus connects the instructor with the students, acquaints students with the structure of course, sets the tone for caring and defines students' responsibilities for success. Learner-centred syllabi help to build greater student-instructor rapport considering the instructor more approachable, encouraging, open-minded and enthusiastic for teaching and learning (reference).

A learner-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. Diamond, 1997, p. xi.

3. How to Construct Learner-Centered Syllabus

Focus on the needs of the students, as these relate to their learning process

- Emphasis shifts from "What are we going to cover?" to "How can the course promote learning and intellectual development in students"?
- Language aims to foster a more engaging learning environment.

Foster a learning community

- Inform how to communicate with the instructor (eg. office hours and methods of contact).
- Use a positive tone and set a tone of caring.
- Describe the importance of active learning and encourage students to help each other.
- Convey your enthusiasm for teaching and learning.

Facilitate the academic success of students

- Include rationale for course objectives and assignments.
- When possible, allow student to have choice around deadlines and/or assignments.
- Guide students to overcome potential pitfalls.
- Outline expectations for students and ask what they expect of us.
- Include recommendations for how to tackle certain projects, assignments.

View learning as a partnership between instructor(s) and students

- This philosophy of teaching goes beyond the syllabus, and requires a redesign of the instructional and learning activities.

4. What are the characteristics and benefits of a Learner-Centered Syllabus?

There are numerous characteristics and benefits associated with a learner-centered syllabus. Transitioning between a “traditional” syllabus to a more learner-centered requires some careful planning and thinking. The shift may be done over time and adjustments made progressively to better address students’ needs. You may want to consider up front how you would like to address the students through the syllabus, with a writing style that provides a cohesive picture between you in class and the way the document is written.

Here are some of the characteristics and benefits of a learning-centered syllabus:

- Provide a cohesive picture between “me” in class and the way I write the syllabus
- Establishes connection with students
- Acquaints students with structure of course
- Sets the warm and caring tone
- Defines students’ responsibilities for success (e.g. *How to do well in this course?*)
- Includes brief but enough descriptions of assignments
- Helps students determine their readiness for the course
- States how course fits into the overall program, or meets certain accreditation requirements
- Communicates technology requirements (if applicable).

These elements vary from one discipline to another, you could include some information on student behaviour with regards to labs, computer labs (e.g. food and drink not allowed), clinical placements, etc.

5. Strategies and Examples

In the following section, we provide few examples of course syllabi to show the difference between a traditional format and a more learning-centered approach. The shifting from traditional to learner-centered requires several iterations.

Office Hours and Communication

Listing your contact information only will not be enough to encourage students to reach out to you for help. Use a friendly tone to present yourself (instructor) more approachable.

Example:

Traditional	Learning-centered
Instructor: John Doe Office: 2.22 Irving K. Barber Learning Centre Telephone: 604-123-4567 Email: john.doe@ubc.ca Office Hour: By appointment	Instructor: John Doe Office: 2.22 Irving K. Barber Learning Centre Telephone: 604-123-4567 Email: john.doe@ubc.ca Office Hour: TR 9:30–10:30 am (walk-in) Virtual Office Hour: W 7:00-8:00 pm www.virtualoffice.ca/JohnDoe

	<p>I always welcome you to contact me outside of class and office hours. During my office hours, my door and my virtual door are always open. Stop by or call me during the office hour. If the office hour does not work with your schedule, please let me know and I will try to work out a time to meet you.</p> <p>If you prefer emails, I aim to respond within 48 hours.</p>
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Course Overview

Provide a clear statement of intended goals and student outcomes in one paragraph, with the intention of establishing a connection with the students. The emphasis will be on the tone of the paragraph.

Example:

Traditional	Learner-centered
<p>FNH 200 Exploring Our Foods</p> <p>Students are introduced to chemical and physical properties of foods; issues pertaining to safety; nutritive value and consumer acceptability of food, food quality and additives; food preservation techniques and transformation of agricultural commodities into food products; foods of the future.</p>	<p>FNH 200 Exploring Our Foods</p> <p>In a collaborative and peer-based environment, we will explore the chemical and physical properties of foods and examine how issues pertaining to safety, nutritive value and consumer acceptability of food may affect our own health and safety. You will also learn about different processing techniques and become an informed consumer.</p>

Traditional	Learner-centered
<p>This course in integral calculus complements technical content with applications and examples drawn primarily from life sciences. The course starts by calculating areas and approximating the area using thin stripes as an introduction to Riemannian sums, which then lead to the <i>Fundamental Theorem of Calculus</i>. Applications of integration include determining the center of mass, calculating volumes and lengths of curves. After introducing different techniques of integration further applications are discussed in the context of continuous probability distributions as well as differential equations. After an exploration of series and sequences the course ends with an introduction to Taylor polynomials.</p>	<p>This course in integral calculus introduces you to the foundational knowledge that is required throughout your program.</p> <p>Together, we will explore various ways of applying fundamental integral calculus knowledge to real examples drawn primarily from life sciences. These examples are aimed to make your learning experience more enthusiastic and applicable to different contexts you may be involved in in other courses or in your professional career.</p> <p>Learning objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By the end of this course, you will be able to: • Calculate and approximate areas using thin stripes • Determine the center of mass • Calculate volumes and lengths of curves

- Use Taylor polynomials

Assessment and Feedback

Major assignments/assessments should be adequately paced and scaffolded. Describe them briefly including the explanation on how they will help students attain the course objectives, and what kinds of the feedback strategies will be used to guide students along the way.

Example:

Traditional	Learning-centered
<p>Quizzes</p> <p>There are six quizzes for Module 1 ~ 6. The quizzes will be timed (15 mins for each quiz), and each quiz is worth 5 points towards final grade.</p> <p>After the due date, each quiz will remain available to students who have not submitted it, but it will no longer be possible to receive the grade for the quiz.</p> <p>Term Paper</p> <p>The term paper (1500 words, double-spaced, in docx format) must be submitted online via the assignment tool before 5:00 pm on the last day of class.</p>	<p>Quizzes</p> <p>End-of-module quizzes are available online to help you stay on track with your readings. You may re-do the quiz once two days after your initial attempt as I wish that you will use the time in between to review the concepts and be prepared.</p> <p>The quiz questions and your answers will remain available.</p> <p>Term Paper</p> <p>In order to help you develop a meaningful research paper, we encourage you to submit your paper in three stages:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A 200-word outline stating your research questions, describing why it matters to you and how the topic is relevant to the course content. You should also include a few primary sources. You may submit this to me before the Reading Break. 2. A rough draft to be submitted two weeks before the due date. The TAs and I will do our best to identify gaps you may have and offer some quick advices. 3. The final version of your term paper (1500 words, double-spaced, in docx format) must be submitted online via the assignment tool before 5:00 pm on the last day of class. <p>The submission of the outline and draft is voluntary. Though you will not receive additional mark for these submissions, I believe that you will benefit from following a timeline and receiving early feedback from the teaching team.</p>

Traditional	Learning-centered
Quizzes	Quizzes

<p>There are six quizzes for Module 1 ~ 6. The quizzes will be timed (15 mins for each quiz), and each quiz is worth 5 points towards final grade.</p> <p>After the due date, the quizzes will no longer be available.</p> <p>Assessment examples: http://wiki.ubc.ca/images/7/77/FNH_355_Syllabus_January_2017.pdf</p>	<p>A number of online quizzes are available throughout the course to ensure that you are on track with your readings. You may re-take a quiz once two days after your initial attempt as I wish that you will use the time in between to review the concepts and be prepared.</p> <p>After the due date, quizzes will remain available until the final exam.</p>
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Learning Activities

You may also want to introduce the different learning activities and indicate how they will support students in their learning and acquire the knowledge or develop the skills required to succeed in the course.

Example:

Traditional	Learning-centered
<p>Field Trip</p> <p>Attendance at the field trip is mandatory. Please arrive on time for the guided tour. You should answer all questions on the worksheet associated with this field trip and submit to your TA at the end of the field trip. Late submission will not be accepted.</p>	<p>Field Trip</p> <p>On the third Thursday in March we will visit Site XYZ to experience the living situations of miners during the Gold Rush. A week before the field trips, you should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explore the its website 2. Identify up to three specific locations where you really want to explore during the field trip and explain why these particular locations are important to you. 3. At the end of the field trip, work with a partner, identify gaps in the exhibitions and propose a plan for future development

Course Schedule

Course schedule is more than a mere list of content topics and readings. It should contain enough information including topics, readings, learning activities and due dates for assignments to guide students throughout the course. It should be neatly formatted and organized.

Example:

Traditional

Week 1 Introduction to the course and Lesson 1

Readings:

- Food Consumption Highlights in Canada in 2009
- Top Ten Functional Food Trends in 2014

Week 2 Lesson 2

Readings:

- Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Use of Nutritive and Nonnutritive Sweeteners. (2012). J Acad Nutr Diet.112:739-758.
- American Dietetic Association (2007). Position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada: Dietary Fatty Acids. Journal of the AMERICAN DIETETIC ASSOCIATION 107(9), 1599-1611.

Learner-centered

Week	Topic & Reading	In-Class Activity	Due Dates
Week 1	Lesson 1: Food Science and the Canadian Food System Readings: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course Syllabus• Food Consumption Highlights in Canada in 2009• Top Ten Functional Food Trends in 2014	Introduce course syllabus We will discuss what food science is and explore what Canadian eat.	Bring your questions on the course syllabus to the class.
Week 2	Lesson 2: Chemical and Physical Properties of Food Readings: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Use of Nutritive and Nonnutritive Sweeteners. (2012). J Acad Nutr Diet.112:739-758.• American Dietetic Association (2007). Position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada: Dietary Fatty Acids. Journal of the AMERICAN DIETETIC ASSOCIATION 107(9), 1599-1611.	A range of food samples will be available in class today.	Online self-introduction due

Course Policy

Establishing ground rules for the course, your expectations. Make it sound more encouraging, less negative in the formulation.

Examples

Traditional	Learning-centered
<p>Late Penalty: Course assessments are due at the time and date specified in the syllabus, with no exception.</p> <p>10% of your assignment grade will be deducted for each late day.</p>	<p>Due dates are set to help you manage your time. Adhesion to the suggested timeline will help you earn 100% of your desired grades. If you need extra time to complete your assignment, please consult with me first.</p>

Traditional	Learning-centered
<p>Class Discussion:</p> <p>You are expected to participate actively in class discussion. It is unacceptable to come to class without preparing. Do not sit in quietly during class discussion.</p>	<p>Class Discussion:</p> <p>Active participation in class discussion will help you learn better in this course and get a deeper understanding of the key concepts. Don't be shy in providing your perspective. All questions and responses will be valued in this class. You are encouraged not only to engage in discussion actively but also to collaborate with peers for learning. Your peers (not just the instructor or TA) are your valuable resources because you all come from different backgrounds and experiences.</p>

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity Statement

Your department may provide statements for this section. However, you may want to provide some additional resources to help your students write and get additional support. You may refer your students to the Centre for Writing and Scholarly Communication: <http://learningcommons.ubc.ca/tutoring-studying/writing/>

The resources help address particular teaching context and discipline needs (e.g. argument and persuasion, science writing resource).

Presentation and Visual Formatting: Concise and Clear

The last piece of a learner-centered syllabus is also the visual presentation of the document, short, concise, easy to read, with a visual emphasis on the key elements of the course. The idea is not to put as much information as possible, but rather synthesize. Keep in the mind that the course syllabus is the most important document of the course, it sets the tone of the course, hence the importance of emphasizing on the visual formatting of the document.

Examples

Traditional	Learning-centered
<p>Minimum variations in font size and limited spacing</p>	<p>One more example (not the level of art work)</p> <p>Catherine Rawn, PSYC102 http://blogs.ubc.ca/catherinerawn/files/2015/01/Psyc-102-Syllabus-2014.15-Section-4-FINAL.pdf</p>

Gail Hammond, FNH250

http://wiki.ubc.ca/images/b/b7/16F-250_Syllabus.pdf

Tips for Sharing your Syllabus

You can present your syllabus in different formats:

- Connect, students can access it in advance and at all time (PDF format preferred);
- UBC Wiki, easier to share and update from term to term;
- UBC Blogs, openly accessible.

Further Resources

If you want to dig into learner-centered syllabus, here are good resources....

References

Bart, M (2015). A Learner-Centered Syllabus Helps Set the Tone for Learning, Retrieved from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/a-learner-centered-syllabus-helps-set-the-tone-for-learning/>

Verwoord, R. & Iqbal, Isabeau (2015). What is a *Syllabus and What Should it Include?* Retrived from <http://cdi.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2015/05/What-Should-Go-In-Your-Syllabus3.pdf>

Richmond, A. S., Slattery, J. M., Mitchell, N., Morgan, R. K., & Becknell, J. (2016). Can a learner-centered syllabus change students' perceptions of student–professor rapport and master teacher behaviors?. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 2(3), 159. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/stl0000066>

Syllabus Best Practices (IOWA State University)
<http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/preparing-to-teach/how-to-create-an-effective-syllabus>

Course Syllabus Checklist (Wolf, 2004)

Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. John Wiley & Sons.