

Transcript Video 1: Overview & Introduction to the Topic

Welcome to the video series on “Start with your syllabus: Six principles of an inclusive syllabus design.”

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Who doesn't dread the first day of classes and having to go through the syllabus with students? Who doesn't feel like students are not reading the syllabus? Who maybe dreads writing a syllabus?

What if we used our syllabus to begin establishing high-quality relationships with our students? What if we used our syllabus to communicate our commitment to inclusive and equitable teaching and learning?

In this video series titled “Start with your syllabus: Six principles of an inclusive syllabus design”, I will offer you insights on how to use an inclusive design perspective when creating a syllabus. Grounded in a review of relevant literature, I synthesize existing research about syllabus design into six intersecting principles that serve as a scaffolding framework for the (re)design of course syllabi.

These six principles are:

1. Focus on Student Learning
2. Course Design around Big Themes and Essential Questions
3. Application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles
4. Tone and Rhetoric - Inclusive and Motivating Language
5. Supportive Course Policies
6. Accessible Design

Each of the videos in this series is focused on one these six principles. You will learn why this principle matters, and you will find examples on how to apply that principle as you design an inclusive syllabus. At the end of each video, a slide with a 'pause' icon will signal an opportunity for you to pause and take some time to reflect, which will help you to think about your syllabus so that you can apply the principle to your own syllabus design.

To get the best learning experience out of this video series, I encourage you to engage actively with the content. Have pen and paper ready or your computer open to take notes. If you are working on revising an existing syllabus, have a hard copy or an opened electronic version. If you are designing a syllabus from scratch, I encourage you to open the online Google Syllabus template and begin filling in some of the blanks. You can find the link for the template in the Tools section. There you can also find a link to a rubric for evaluating the inclusiveness of a

syllabus. You could begin there to see how inclusive your syllabi already are. Or, you could decide to focus on just one or two of the principles to make your syllabi more inclusive.

These are the things that I hope you will do and take away from this video series:

- Learn about six principles of an inclusive syllabus design and how you can use it as a guiding framework for your syllabus and course (re)design.
- Analyze your own syllabi through this framework.
- Apply the principles into your course and syllabus design.

Let's take a moment to think about these two questions:

1. What words come to your mind when you think about a course syllabus?
2. What is the purpose of a syllabus?

Jot down your thoughts on a piece of paper.

What did you write down?

One of the most common responses that I get when I ask this question, is "the syllabus is a contract." Viewed in this way, a syllabus is treated as a quasi-legal document that serves mainly administrative purposes. A syllabus created through this lens does not just serve the purpose of providing students and other interested parties with relevant information about the course. The syllabus as contract model is also meant to protect the instructor and the institution from legal challenges by students.

What are we missing out on when we treat syllabi like that?

Let us begin by expanding how we think about the purposes of course syllabi.

Course syllabi matter because they are "unobtrusive but powerful indicators of what takes place in classrooms" (Bers, Davis, & Taylor). The use of syllabi in assessments: Unobtrusive indicators and tools for faculty development. *Assessment Update* 12(3), 4-7.

The ideal syllabus provides a window into our classroom. To use another metaphor, a good syllabus provides a pathway of learning through your course.

The course syllabus is typically the first point of interaction and the initial tool of communication between students and their teachers.

It is important to remember that syllabi are rhetorical not just informational documents. As such they should be written with our student audience in mind. As Anne-Marie Womack of Tulane University says, "I had worked to make the course content diverse and accessible but had ignored the document that facilitates that content" (503).

An inclusive syllabus functions as an important educational tool.

For instructors, the syllabus provides a critical opportunity to communicate to students not only the content and structure of the course, but also the expectations and intentions of the learning environment.

An inclusive syllabus provides signposts for students about what they will learn and do and what they need to know to succeed in the course.

The syllabus is an opportunity for you to identify important learning outcomes, explain what students need to do to achieve mastery of this learning outcomes, and to discuss options and accessibility.

Purposes of a syllabus include setting the tone for a course, motivating students as well as showcasing the instructor's pedagogical practices and intentions for the kind of learning environment they want to cultivate.

In addition, syllabi function as socialization tools that mediate the complex social interactions within a classroom. In these ways, syllabi can positively shape the class climate and help to build a sense of community, respect, and mutual support.

Now take a moment to pause and reflect on the function of syllabi.

1. Is your syllabus an educational tool rather than just a contract? How so?
2. Have you written your syllabus for your students?
3. Does your syllabus provide a pathway of learning through the course?

Check out the next video to explore how you can turn your syllabus into an educational tool or a "vehicle for learning" by shifting from a focus on content to a focus on student learning.

Reference:

Bers, T. H., Davis, B. D., & Taylor, B. (2000). The use of syllabi in assessments: Unobtrusive indicators and tools for faculty development. *Assessment Update* 12(3), 4-7.

Womack, A. (2017). Teaching is accommodation: Universally designing composition classrooms and syllabi. *College Composition & Communication*, 68(3), 494-525.