

Transcript Video 2: Principle 1: Focus on Student Learning

In this video, we will explore how you can write your syllabus as a pathway of learning through the course.

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.

The course syllabus is typically the first point of interaction and the initial tool of communication between students and their teachers. As such, it gives students a first impression of the instructor and what to expect from the course. Research shows that this first impression matters.

Students who read a learning-focused syllabus had significantly more positive perceptions of the document itself, which translated into more positive perceptions of the course described in the document and of the instructor of the course. A learning-focused syllabus positively affected students’ motivation before students even entered the classroom; thus, supporting students’ meaningful engagement with the course.

However, many syllabi operate as part of the hidden curriculum – those unwritten rules, norms, messages and hidden biases about students that we communicate implicitly through the subtext of a syllabus. The hidden curriculum that flows through a syllabus can have a negative impact on students’ learning experiences and academic success particularly for students from historically marginalized and underrepresented populations. It puts students who are not familiar with the hidden curriculum at a disadvantage from the start.

Examining the subtext of your syllabus to uncover its hidden curriculum is a critical step when striving to teach more inclusively and equitably. Read your syllabus through your students’ eyes. How does reading the syllabus make you feel? Like a valued member of a learning community? An empowered learner? Or, as a potential rule breaker?

Consider this:

- Have you used acronyms in your syllabus without explaining them?
- Do you assume that students know what office hours are and why they should make use of them?
- Do you talk a lot about what students shouldn’t do or what the consequences for certain undesired behaviors will be, thus, implying that you assume your students will adopt negative behaviors?
- Do you explicitly state the values and expectations that guide your teaching and that are important for students’ success in your course?

The first principle of an inclusive syllabus design asks you to shift the focus of your syllabus. Traditional syllabi emphasize the course content and structure of the course. They use phrases

like 'What the course will do' or highlight what the instructor will teach. A content-focused syllabus typically simply lays out the topics, readings, assignments, and course policies. What it does not do is provide students with a nuanced understanding of the processes involved in learning and mastering the content.

Shift the focus of your syllabus to make it learning-focused. A learning-focused syllabus tells students what and how they will learn, what they will do, and what will help them to be a successful learner in the course.

In essence, a learning-focused syllabus emphasizes the realistic aspects of learning and participating, rather than simply laying out the work to be done and what not to do!

Pause for a moment and reflect. Assess your syllabus for its orientation.

1. How does your syllabus provide your students with a pathway of learning through the course?
2. Do you provide information on what students need to do and what resources are available so that they can be successful learners?
3. Do you state both high-level long-term goals and shorter-term measurable learning objectives?
4. Do you explain to students how content, learning activities and assessments connect?
5. Are you transparent about what students need to do to successfully complete assignments?
6. Are you transparent about how you will evaluate students' learning?
7. What may be confusing for your students?
8. What do you need to clarify?

Check out the next video to learn how writing your syllabus around big themes and essential questions will allow your students to see the relevance of the course for them.