IT’S ON THE SYLLABUS:
BUILDING YOUR BEST COURSE OUTLINE

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Overview

- Discussion: what do you want your course outline to do?
- Expectations
- Do they even read it?
- The graphic syllabus
- The promising syllabus
- Syllabus under construction
- Providing a course structure or framework
Discussion

- Why do we give students a course outline?
- What do you ultimately want your course outline to do?
Expectations

- Defining your expectations—and those of your institution, program, and department
- Determining student expectations
- The power of positive language
- Creating a positive class culture
- The course outline as a “motivational tool” (Bowen, 2012)
- The course outline as an introduction to disciplinary practice (Nilson, 2007)
Do They Even Read It?

- Weimer (2013): “Do less telling so students can do more discovering”
- Avoid “going over” the course outline if possible
- Give them 10 minutes to review it and give them a chance to ask questions
- Lang (2010): Ask them to find a partner for a syllabus-related activity
- Bowen (2012): Provide the outline in advance and tell them there will be a brief quiz on the first day
- Other strategies?
The Graphic Syllabus

- Text-only syllabi can be difficult for some students to grasp.

(Nilson, 2007)
The Graphic Syllabus

- Nilson (2007): If possible, provide a concept map or other visual road map of the course so students can share your vision (and maybe develop their own)
The Graphic Syllabus
The Graphic Syllabus
The Promising Syllabus

“‘The promising syllabus,’ Bain wrote to me via e-mail, ‘fundamentally recognizes that people will learn best and most deeply when they have a strong sense of control over their own education rather than feel manipulated by someone else’s demands’” (Lang, 2006).
According to Bain and Lang, a promising syllabus

- Explains the course’s promise to the students
- Describes the activities that will help them fulfill the promise
- Begins a conversation about how the instructor and student would best come to understand the nature and progress of the student’s learning
Is there an opportunity for students to provide input into the course?

The amount of student control may vary dramatically depending on the course, its level, and the program it is in (Lang, Bain, Hudd)
Structure?

- How much structure is enough? How much is too much?
- How can you ensure your course doesn’t fall apart if you give students some autonomy?
- How can you meet institutional requirements while still offering students some control over their learning?
Final Thoughts

- From Lang (2006): “In putting together the syllabus, Bain says, and possibly ceding some of your control of it to the students, you have to ask yourself the only question that really matters: ‘What will help them learn?’”
Examples of creative course outlines


Resources
