

# Learning-Centered Syllabi: Opportunities to Engage Students

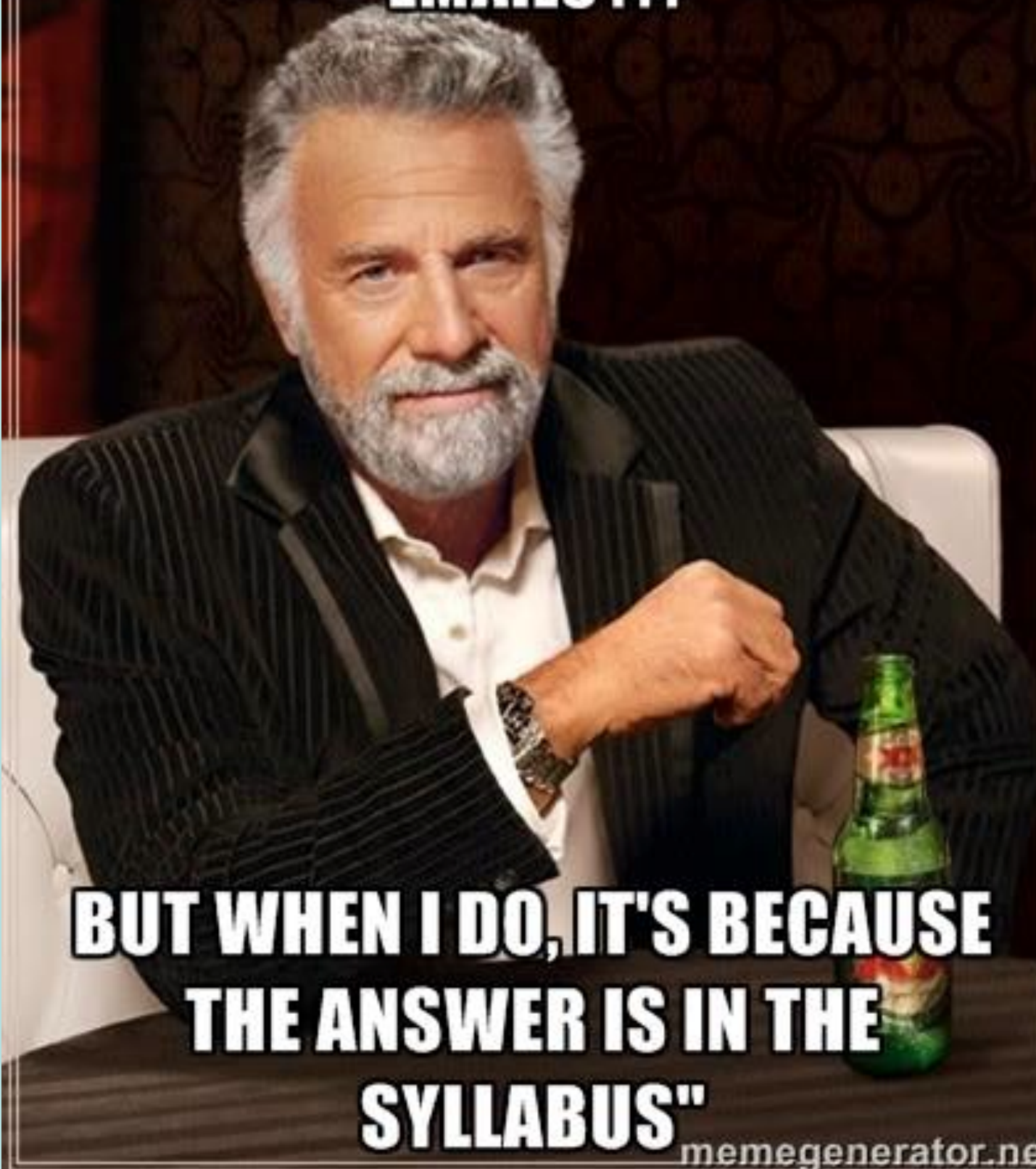
Lolita Paff

Penn State Berks

2015 *Teaching Professor* Conference



**"I DON'T ALWAYS IGNORE STUDENT  
EMAILS ...**



# Common Purposes & Uses

- \* Set the tone for the course
- \* Motivate students to set lofty but achievable goals
- \* Facilitate course planning for faculty
- \* Structure students work over the course of the semester
- \* Define expectations between faculty & students
- \* Serve as portfolio artifact for promotion, tenure & evaluation

Not-so-common purpose: **Syllabus as LEARNING TOOL**

# Learning-Centered

*“A learning-centered approach to college education asks you to consider how each and every aspect of your course can most effectively support student learning.*

*How, then, can you use your syllabus to promote your students’ engagement with subject matter and their intellectual development?”*

*~ Grunert, 1997, p.3.*





- I. Shift the Focus
- II. Mind the Tone
- III. Construct Collaboratively
- IV. Revisit Regularly

# I. Shift the Focus





*“Students who read a good syllabus are more likely to feel that course strategies have been designed to help them reach their goals, rather than merely as busywork or, worse, to torture them.”*  
~ Slattery & Carlson, 2013, p. 159



**Does your syllabus indicate that all the decisions about the course have already been made?**

**When the teacher decides everything, how does that affect the motivation to learn?**

**Does teacher decision-making help students develop as independent learners?**



# Strategies

- \* Craft a syllabus that focuses more on learning & less on rules
- \* Implement a “How-to Use This Syllabus” activity
- \* First-meeting “Expectations” activity
- \* Second-meeting follow up activity
- \* Incorporate student input in some policy/learning decisions

Everyone knows learning  
must be serious and difficult  
and you must remain seated  
at all times. No fun allowed.



## II. Mind the tone

**How would you characterize  
the tone of your syllabus?**





*“Legalistic statements about attendance and academic honesty are often required by university handbooks and state laws and can easily undermine student/faculty relationships. Nonetheless, with forethought, one can be clear about the rules governing classroom behavior without being cold and accusatory.”*

~ Slattery & Carlson, 2013, p. 162



*A syllabus, like any other text,  
cannot be separated from its  
author; nor is it above scrutiny  
and deconstruction.*

*Professors, as critical thinkers  
themselves, should be aware that  
their syllabi are alive, symbolic,  
and vocal.*

*A syllabus really can talk, and it's  
saying a lot more than we think."*

~ M. D'Antonio, 2007





*“The implicit message of the modern course syllabus is that the student will not do anything unless bribed by grades or forced by threats (p. 52)...*

*It is assumed that we have to teach in an authoritarian manner because of the way students are. However, all of the literature on student motivation has convinced me that the opposite is likely to be true: students act the way they do because we treat them the way we do”*

*~ Singham, 2007, p.55.*





# US v. THEM

- \* Number of policies increased
- \* Length/Details of policies increased
- \* Use of 3rd person didn't reflect inclusive practice
- \* Academic integrity section was lengthened & paired with harsh language

In sum... an adversarial tone and stance emerged.

**What implicit messages are  
communicated in your syllabi?**

# Partners in Learning

- \* Faculty Expectations is now paired with Student Expectations
- \* Welcome Message speaks to my love of the discipline & a hope they will love it too
- \* Policy section is decreased from a full page to 11 lines



**How has your syllabus evolved  
as you've grown as a teacher?**

# III. Construct Collaboratively

What's required?  
What's recommended?  
Who should decide?



*The focus of the learner-centered syllabus is on students and their learning outcomes.*

*[It] contains the same information as a traditional syllabus. However, the information is presented in a way that creates a community learning environment in which power and control are shared between the instructor and the student.”*

*~ M. Robb, 2012, p.489.*

# Learning-Centered Goals

- \* Define responsibilities
- \* State course goals
- \* Establish standards and procedures for evaluation
- \* Acquaint students with course logistics and policies
- \* Establish lines of communication
- \* Provide access to course materials



# Learning-Centered Components

- \* Welcome message
- \* Rationales for objectives & assignments
- \* Positive & negative motivational statements
- \* Self-regulated learning & learning readiness information:
  - \* How to plan for tasks and how to do well on assessments
  - \* Study strategies, note-taking, writing in the course
  - \* Model of professional writing / thinking in the discipline
  - \* Broad lessons: integrity, punctuality, professionalism

# Collaborative Construction

**What topics or areas are of greatest interest to us as a class?**

**What are your goals, expectations, and learning needs for this course?**

**How can we best connect our readings and discussions to our everyday lives?**

**How can we engage with multiple learning styles throughout the semester?**

“You might want to think of your syllabus as a negotiable contract, a well-considered plan in which you are willing to reinvent some of the structure according to the students and situation you find in your class”  
~ Grunert, 1997, p 21.

# VI. Revisit Regularly





**How often do you refer to the syllabus during the term?**

**Have you ever asked students for feedback on your syllabus?**

**What process, if any, do you use to regularly and systematically review and reflect on your syllabus?**

# Strategies

- \* Connect assessments to the learning objectives
- \* Revisit the syllabus, during class, throughout the term
- \* Explicitly link class activities, assignments, readings, etc. to applicable areas of the syllabus
- \* Ask students for feedback about the syllabus at strategic points in the course

*If we treat a syllabus as a document in process rather than as a finished text to be “put to bed” at the end of each semester, we have created a powerful course assessment tool that can play a useful role in conjunction with standardized and open-ended student evaluations as well as classroom observations.*

*In other words, to be genuinely “promising,” a syllabus needs to be a dynamic one.*

*~ M. Roberts, 2013, p. 109*



*Thank You!*

Lolita Paff  
Penn State Berks

LAP21@psu.edu

Presentation Resources: [www.lolitapaff.com](http://www.lolitapaff.com)

Follow me on Twitter @1313lolita

# References

- Blinne, K.C. 2013. Start With the Syllabus: HELPing Learners Learn Through Class Content Collaboration, *College Teaching*, 61: 41-43.
- D'Antonio, M. July 19, 2007. If Your Syllabus Could Talk. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Accessed April 26, 2014. <http://chronicle.com/article/If-Your-Syllabus-Could-Talk/46604>
- Grunert, J. 1997. *The Course Syllabus: A learning-centered approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.
- Robb, M. 2012. The Learner Centered Syllabus. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 43(11): 489-490.
- Roberts, M. 2013. Creating a Dynamic Syllabus: A Strategy for Course Assessment. *College Teaching*, 61: 109.
- Singham, M. 2007. Death to the Syllabus! *Liberal Education*, 93(4): 52-56.
- Slattery, J. M. & Carlson, J.F. 2013. Preparing an Effective Syllabus Current Best Practices. *College Teaching*, 53(4): 159-164.