EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

Course syllabi: Components and outcomes assessment

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Abstract

Course syllabi operate as basic structures of nursing curricula. They communicate and shape student and faculty responsibilities. Syllabi function to orient new faculty to the cultural norms of nursing programs, specify student learning outcomes, connect course outcomes to the program level, and provide evidence for accreditor organizations of curricular quality and achievement of standards. A committee on assessment and evaluation of a university's nursing programs reviewed examples of syllabi and identified needed revisions. Members examined literature on syllabus construction and alignment with student learning outcomes along with faculty concerns about syllabi. Consequently, the nursing programs' activities influenced a university's review and standardization of syllabi in the context of nursing accreditation self-study and university regional accreditation standards.

Key words

Syllabi review, Components, Nursing programs, University, Standard format

Introduction

Syllabi are important curricular structures; effective syllabi support curricular integrity [1]. They communicate what faculty of academic programs value in relation to student learning outcomes. Syllabi are used by faculty to guide learners through courses by addressing current issues and important disciplinary questions [2]. Promising syllabi offer a view of the opportunities that courses offer students, challenging them to analyze and answer complex problems [2]. Recognizing the contribution of syllabi to academic nursing programs, this paper explores components of syllabi and related literature and faculty issues with syllabi, and examines one program's experience with reexamination of course syllabi and its concurrent influence on university syllabus standards.

Most syllabi are complex academic documents. They connect foundational, core, and prerequisite knowledge, skills, and values learned in primary, secondary, and tertiary educational programs to undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral program student learning outcomes. As a result, critical thinking, communication (written and spoken), information literacy, and teamwork outcomes often reappear in nursing program syllabi within a disciplinary context and emphasis. Syllabi incorporate student learning outcomes based on the discipline-specific essentials of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs. They function for students as an indicator about how a course will "…shape up simply from the elements of the syllabus itself" [3]. Syllabi are often described as legal documents [4] and a contract between the university and students [5, 6].

They may be used in judicial hearings [5]. Furthermore, violating the syllabus represents a triggering agent of instructional dissent by students [7].

The importance of syllabus construction for assessment of student learning cannot be overstated. Syllabi direct how courses are delivered and graded [8]; they are foundational parts of curricula. They stand as visible sources of evidence that student learning outcomes, identified by faculty and other stakeholders, are operationalized in a curriculum via courses. The match of course assignments to student learning outcomes and the correspondence of course learning outcomes to program level learning outcomes illustrate programmatic consistency and alignment. If syllabi are archived in paper or electronic forms, they demonstrate that courses actually existed.

Descriptions of course assignments and grading percents on syllabi may be selected, aggregated, and documented as indicators of programmatic student learning achievement. If they are used in this way, they are considered embedded outcome measures. Add-on measures may be standardized tests such as predictor exams used to indicate readiness for taking the professional nursing license examination. Evaluation methods are either formative or summative outcomes within a syllabus; they also may serve as formative or summative measures depending on the placement of each course in curriculum progression and assessment plans.

Related literature

A review of the literature revealed a dearth of recent articles addressing syllabus issues. Eberly, Newton, and Wiggins [5] suggested that syllabi, regardless of their importance for sharing information with students, are not often incorporated into curriculum design discussions. They noted that syllabi represent an implicit contract between students and the university and function as significant contributors to the higher education agenda. Administrative functions include the public descriptions of courses, evidence in grievance and judicial hearings, and determinations of course equivalency in transfer situations. Next, syllabi help faculty to evaluate course development, so that review and evaluation of syllabi assist faculty in the development of courses and clarify mutual responsibilities of faculty and students. Norms are codified, topics and assignments are specified, assignments and tests are described with dates, and objectives are itemized. A syllabus sets the tone of a course, and may implicitly reveal the faculty member's beliefs about the purpose of the course [5].

Eberlyn Newton, and Wiggins [5] conducted a content analysis of general education syllabi (N = 145) to describe attributes and characteristics of course syllabi. Checklist categories were: acknowledgment of general education guidelines, basic course information, required reading, course format, course content, performance evaluation, use of technology, and responsibility for learning. The incorporation of the general education curriculum into approved courses was examined. Content knowledge was the most often mentioned category. Students' responsibilities for learning were not often described. More detail was called for in relation to responsibilities of faculty members and students, technology use, detailed content outlines and readings, opportunities for interactive or experiential learning, various performance assessment methods for assignments, and incorporation of general education guidelines.

Emphasizing her preference for creating a skeleton syllabus demonstrating her commitment to collaborative learning approaches, Hudd [9] explained how she presented students enrolled in an introductory sociology course opportunities to contribute to course content, presentation format, and performance assessment. She attached the schedule separately with due dates for student use when arranging assignments. Students reached consensus during group work for formulating an assignment list for the course. Open discussion of assessment and student performance functioned to stimulate higher performance levels in students. The collaborative learning approach helped students become more invested in course content and performance evaluation. One problem noted was that the syllabus became final at the third class meeting, suggesting a delay in course progress; another was that some students continued to negotiate assignments after the final list was shared. Shifting the control and authority may change the faculty-student relationship and increasingly engage students in courses.

Faculty use various communication strategies when presenting and constructing course syllabi [4]. Thompson [4] conducted an interpretive study to understand faculty members' (N = 19) strategies using semi-structured interviews and field notes on first-day syllabus presentations (n = 13). He also analyzed course syllabi (N = 19). Various disciplines were represented. Patterns emerged; faculty use welcoming strategies (getting acquainted, being positive: encouragement leads to success, selling the course, inclusive language, and miscellaneous), tension balancing strategies (softening the blow, rules strategies, negotiating power through the syllabus, miscellaneous), and presentational strategies (highlight and elaborate, focusing attention through classroom technology to focus students' attention when constructing and presenting syllabi). The way faculty welcome students to a course using a syllabus may help faculty communicate their love of the subject and overcome the potentially adversarial relationship implicit in the faculty student relationship in a course due to course rigor and rules. Perhaps the way faculty present syllabi helps prevent "creeping authoritarianism" (gradual increase of statements in syllabi that seem harsh and assert faculty power) in courses [6].

Shelton [10] provided practical points on the value and purpose of course syllabi for nurse educators. She emphasized that a syllabus, as a written communication document depicting an overview of a course with details of what will be taught, provides a map or blueprint for students' and faculty members' responsibilities. She also advised that if faculty members teaching a course for the first time did not like a syllabus, that they needed to keep some components, including course number, description, and pre- and co-requisites prior to course revision. She allowed that current concepts, evaluations, and learning activities could be modified. She specified components of syllabi. See Table 1 for specific components. However, one caution was offered: curriculum committees often require that syllabi changes are reviewed by nursing programs, and at times at the school and university level. This typically refers to the objectives of the course.

Building on the contributions of Grunert [11] who described essential parts of a syllabus, O'Brien, Millis, and Cohen [12] promoted the contribution of a learning-centered syllabus to helping students understand their role in a course. They considered the process by which faculty create syllabi, including goals, assessment and grading practices, course content, and student activities, a means to focus faculty on students and students on their learning. They proposed that learning-centered syllabi foster student acquisition of content and process skills that could be selected as learning outcomes. Through syllabi, students learn what faculty will do and what students might do to achieve course learning outcomes; students may also develop acceptance of a life-long responsibility for learning. The authors described parts of syllabi, such as a faculty teaching philosophy statement, expectations, responsibilities, and course policies, for example statements on civility and disability. According to the authors, whether a course is delivered face-to-face or online, the syllabus is a point of interaction between faculty and students in and out of class time. The learning-centered syllabus reinforces the faculty member's intentions, roles, attitudes, and strategies to promote active, purposeful, and effective learning. The authors described a process for planning a learning-centered syllabus: develop a well-grounded rationale for a course; decide on desired outcomes and assessment measures; define and delimit course content; structure students' active involvement in learning; identify and assemble resources required for active learning; request permission to use copyrighted material; and move from planning to composing a learning-centered syllabus.

Faculty concerns about syllabi

One of the benefits of course syllabi is that they are evidence of faculty scholarship, teaching expertise, and consistency of course learning outcomes with the mission of the university and consequently in support of promotion and tenure decisions. They may be required documents for inclusion in dossiers during pre-tenure and subsequent promotion and tenure reviews. Syllabi provide a tangible reflection of faculty competence. They comprise part of a teaching portfolio for faculty [13].

Syllabi demonstrate what faculty are like as people and teachers [4]. Students judge faculty based on syllabi detail and clarity. Based on a syllabus, students may rapidly decide whether or not to stay in a course. A syllabus also offers conflicting perspectives on faculty. Through this document, faculty establish themselves as caring and friendly while simulta-

neously appearing authoritarian as rules and assignments are presented.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics on Components of Syllabi (N = 45)

Component	n(%)
Course Information	
Course Name/Title	37(82.2)
Number	35(77.8)
Section	24(53.3)
Term, Semester/Year/Dates	19(42.2)
Pre-requisites: required courses and skills	17(37.8)
Co-requisites	0(00.00)
Class Days and Times	24(53.3)
Class Location (Room Number and Building or Online)	27(60.0)
Contact Information	
Faculty's Name and Title	40(88.9)
Email Address	39(86.7)
Office: Room Number and Building	37(82.2)
Office Phone	39(86.7)
Fax Numbers	7(15.6)
Office Hours: Day(s) and Times	38(82.4)
Instructional Technologies (e.g., Blackboard address, Email, computer, Internet, CD/ROM)	6(13.3)
Website	14(31.1)
Department Information - (e.g., room/building, phone number)	
Course Description (Catalog version only)	35(77.8)
Course Student Learning Outcomes: Specific measureable results (knowledge, skills, attitudes), expected following learning experience	43(95.6)
Instructional Method (lecture, seminar, interactive/experiential, medium exposure [artifacts, documents, primary sources, *etc.*], class demonstrations, field experience)	17(37.8)
Course Materials	
Textbook, Required (full citation with ISBN)	42(93.3)
Textbook, Suggested/Recommended Readings/Texts (full citation with ISBN), library reserves, course hardware & software requirements, course materials: lab supplies, *etc.*	40(88.9)
Student responsibility statement (e.g., online student success, recommended study habits, conduct, participation in class, learner contact: help for technical questions)	22(48.9)
Course Calendar (Class meeting dates: include Holidays/Other non-meeting dates/Days when classes follow a different schedule; assignments, projects, exam, *etc.* due dates)	33(73.3)
Schedule Grid	27(60.0)
Course Content/Topics/Topical Outline	30(66.7)
Unit Objectives	0(00.0)
Grading Scale	37(82.2)
Grading Method (clear, explicit explanation of evaluation, graded items and activities, grading rubrics)	
Evaluation of course performance: requirements/assignments	44(97.8)
Assignments/Tests: percent of final grade, types of projects, oral presentations, group projects and how group work is graded, quizzes, exams, assignments (papers), homework, rubrics, *etc.*)	39(84.4)
Course laboratories/fieldwork/clinical placements/internships (performance)	8(17.8)
Learning Center Resources (study groups, review sessions, peer tutoring, *etc.*)	17(37.8)
Essential Policy Information	
Attendance	39(86.7)
Lateness	11(24.4)
Late work/assignments	25(55.6)
Missed tests (quizzes, tests)	21(46.7)
American Disability Act of 1990 (may include learning difficulty notification of faculty)	20(44.4)
Academic Integrity/Honor Code/Plagiarism, *etc.*	34(75.6)
Syllabus change policy	16(35.6)
Taping in class/tapes available	6(13.3)
Counseling center contact information	2(4.4)
Copyright	3(6.7)

Note. Initial table format adapted from the Syllabus Checklist developed at Florida State University's Center for Teaching & Learning [19].Retrieved from: http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/explore/bestPractices/syllabi.cfm; and 2. Hunter College, City College of New York [20]. Retrieved from: http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/provost/repository/files/Hunter%20College%20Syllabus%20Checklist.pdf.
Eighteen of the references cited and three university syllabus templates support the components noted in this table.

Syllabi provide an opportunity for faculty to demonstrate their expertise and to highlight effective strategies in a course. Best practices for syllabi include detailed precision, clearly stated student learning outcomes, and day-by-day schedules with reading assignments and course requirements along with due dates [14]. They provide a back-up plan in case of faculty absence. Syllabi serve as a record of personal and pedagogical development [14].

However, the quality of syllabi may vary among faculty. D'Antonio [3] reviewed over 200 syllabi across a college and concluded that she had a unique view of academic processes. She challenged faculty to consider their own lack of attention to detail and lamented the sparse amount of attention in some syllabi paid to what seems obvious for a syllabus, for example, course name and number, faculty names and office hours, and a schedule of readings and assignments. She called for faculty to model the same behaviors expected of students. After reading D'Antonio's [3] essay, Fitzpatrick [15] raised the question of referencing errors in syllabi and suggested that the creativity of syllabi connected to creativity in teaching. She also proposed that end of semester revisions of syllabi should be less routine and more substantial.

As a primary method of delivering higher education, syllabi help faculty to guide and evaluate students in the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values of the disciplines. Syllabi have persisted in the culture of higher education and thus provide a standard expectation of faculty performance. Master syllabi may be developed by academic departments or content experts for use by many faculty members [16]. These are aimed at insuring consistency section to section. Another example is the toolkit model created in open source software; here faculty and students modify or adapt the package for their purposes as long as learning outcomes are achieved [16]. Whether designed for a specific course by a faculty member or by content experts, syllabi signify faculty competence no matter which form of delivery.

Components of syllabi

Davis and Schrader [8] compared nursing faculty members' (n = 27) and students' (n = 199) expectations of syllabi, using an investigator-developed surveys on syllabi definitions, pertinent items for inclusion, and preference for student involvement in developing syllabi. Responses ranked as very important or important to include in syllabi were combined. More than 85% of respondents identified the following as very important/important: grading criteria (grading scales) for courses, grading criteria for assignments, listing of course assignments, required readings, participation requirements, schedule of class meeting times, assignment and testing deadlines, and faculty contact information. Faculty indicated that the purpose of the course, academic honesty and plagiarism policy, and student conduct policy were more important than students, while students rated extra credit policy as more important than faculty. More than faculty, students considered syllabi as learning tools. In contrast to students, faculty responses revealed course objectives as one of the most important course guidelines.

An important element of a syllabus was noted by students: the inclusion of a grading scale [8]. Faculty and students agreed that describing grading criteria in syllabi is important. Syllabi need to specify grading systems so that students can locate the standardized grading scale for each program level and a clear explanation of how a course grade is calculated [13]. If a course includes a clinical practice component, a statement that failing clinical practice means failing a nursing course needs to be specified. An example follows: "The clinical component of NUR XXX is evaluated with a Pass or Fail. A Fail in the clinical component results in failure of the course even if the theory grade is 75% or higher."[13]

The amount of detail on content to be covered in a course can differ according to faculty preference [10]. Similarly, the quantity of detail provided on other course components also varies considerably across disciplines and universities. There are, however, agreed upon elements that have persisted [17]. Stimulated by academic assessment initiatives at La Salle University and its Nursing Programs, syllabi components were discussed. To determine common constituents of syllabi disseminated by colleges and universities, Google was searched using the term "syllabus checklist." No names were identified. Forty-five documents were printed from pages 1 to 6 of the search engine, representing a convenience sample of college and university postings. Each record was reviewed. Elements of syllabi checklists were coded and entered into

IBM SPSS® version 19. Each variable was scaled on presence (yes = 1) or absence (no = 0) of the constituent. See Table 1 for the results of this analysis. Many of the parts and format of a syllabus identified by O'Brien, Millis, and Cohen [12] correspond with those identified in Table 1. The components were compared with other sources; there is agreement on many elements.

Members of the Academic Assessment Committee of the University and Nursing Programs' Assessment and Evaluation Committee (AEC) reviewed the components and compared them to university-wide syllabi across methods and programs. They also reviewed the literature obtained from several databases to help refocus faculty efforts on the overall structure, components, functions, and barriers to syllabus standardization. The Provost supported syllabus standardization and required that essential parts of syllabi be incorporated by academic programs across the university. The initial concern of the AEC nursing committee influenced the university's decision to standardize the syllabus format.

Review of nursing programs' syllabi

The Nursing Programs at La Salle University reviewed, revised, and standardized syllabi a number of times over the last three decades. Nursing faculty lived the phenomenon of "faculty drift," gradually moving away from adherence to some details of an agreed-upon standard format. At the same time they were cognizant of their continuing obligation to orient new faculty to performance expectations and program norms made evident through existing syllabi. They considered themselves adherent to syllabus standards.

When conducting a self-study for submission and review by the national nursing accreditor organization, members of the Nursing Programs' AEC decided that syllabi needed to be evaluated again for consistency. One subcommittee agreed to review undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral syllabi to determine uniformity of information across programs. Some variations were identified. At the time of regional university and nursing programs' self-study activities, the university was moving toward requiring a standardized syllabus format.

Subcommittee members presented the following suggestions to the AEC:

1. Syllabi need to be created as noneditable pdf documents (e.g., locked documents) especially considering courses with multiple sections and adjunct faculty.

2. Couse descriptions must be consistent with catalog statements and may not be changed.

3. Course Student Learning Outcomes must be referenced to standards as American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Essentials: BSN, MSN, DNP; acronyms must be standardized for consistency across courses. Acronyms need to be referenced immediately after the student learning outcomes: Undergraduate Nursing Student Learning Outcome (UGNLO), Graduate Nursing Student Learning Outcome (GRDNLO), and Doctor of Nursing Practice Student Learning Outcome (DNPLO). Course Student Learning Outcomes must be written as integrative behaviors and connect to outcomes measurement. Professional nursing standards must be referenced: see American Nurses Association (e.g., ANA SP [Standards of Practice]) and other published standards (e.g., AACN-BSN [Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice]).

4. The most current edition of American Psychological Association must be followed for citing references.

5. Grading Scale format must be followed exactly as previously established by faculty; one for Undergraduate programs in the School, another for Graduate programs in the School.

6. School Name must be correctly stated: School of Nursing and Health Sciences, not School of Nursing.

7. A clinical section of each syllabus needs to be created as separate, noneditable pdf document; a clinical section course template must be created, reviewed, and standardized specifically addressing schedules.

8.   Clinical grading scale must be consistent: S/U (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory), not P/F (Pass/Fail).

9.   Clinical faculty should not be listed as course faculty on syllabi.

10. A course schedule (calendar or grid) needs to be separate from syllabus; dates vary according to weekly schedules; many dates confuse faculty and students especially concerning clinical placement schedules.

University and program syllabus consistency: Checklist dissemination

The new syllabus checklist required by the university was shared with all nursing faculty during a program meeting and comments were invited. The checklist originated with the components found in Table 1. The Associate Dean for Nursing Programs presented a list of revised acronyms to help faculty reference course student learning outcomes consistently, citing standards and essentials for degree programs such as those published by nursing accreditor and professional organizations. Emphasis was placed on reviewing syllabi to determine the match with applicable standards. Including this level of detail on the syllabus demonstrates to the students how the curriculum is designed to meet standards. The need for regular review of syllabi in groups of faculty teaching different sections of the same course was also reinforced.

The checklist provides a template for faculty to include essential elements in creating a syllabus. The discussion that ensued in a faculty meeting identified faculty drift, and provided an opportunity to clarify misconceptions. While faculty understood changing learning outcomes would need faculty approval, some did not realize that other elements of the syllabus were also subject to the same scrutiny, such as methods of evaluation across sections of the same course. They agreed that course learning outcomes aligned with the student learning outcomes of the program. Evaluation methods, in turn, measure the degree student learning outcomes are met compared to benchmarks. The value of accurately measuring and trending outcomes is critical, not only to determine course effectiveness, but also to meet external accrediting agencies' requirements.

Providing faculty with a template may be viewed by some faculty as a threat to academic freedom. Rather than a threat, the template is a guide to provide students with a consistent means for reviewing and creating courses. Academic freedom is maintained in how the template is completed and how the faculty translates the syllabus into student learning. The syllabus allows faculty to communicate with students, and identifies both faculty and students' responsibilities and expectations for a course. The syllabus should provide a roadmap for the students to successfully achieve learning outcomes of courses. Nonetheless, when standard formats and content are imposed on faculty, whether by interpretations of accrediting organizations or program administrators, faculty feel threatened due to feelings of disempowerment and loss of personal control. They may also not feel confident about changes [18].

In a program where several faculty are teaching multiple sections of the same course, it is essential that there is collaboration on syllabi development. This ensures that fundamental content is consistently taught in each section of the course. Integrating course topics into the syllabi can also provide a process for faculty to map the curriculum to professional standards, the registered nurse licensing exam test plan, and the collegiate nursing programs' essentials/ standards to name a few. It was during this review process, for instance, that faculty in the undergraduate program discovered that content they assumed was being taught in another medical-surgical course was not being taught at all or in other cases, there was redundancy in the same content being taught over several courses.

The syllabi review process has also directed attention to the fact that the syllabi need to accurately reflect current School and University policies. As the faculty prepare for a nursing accreditation visit, this syllabi review presents an opportunity for process improvement and demonstrates the need for collaborative work among the faculty.

Conclusion

Review of current syllabi presents an opportunity for faculty to evaluate the quality of their work. Since syllabi are viewed by students as learning tools and faculty may see them as teaching methods, ongoing assessment of syllabi is essential to faculty performance. Rather than simply reprinting or reposting syllabi semester to semester, faculty might reexamine the contribution of this part of the curriculum to the overall academic enterprise, including the missions of programs, schools, and the university. Courses as exemplified by syllabi need to be reviewed regularly to determine if they address key goals of the program or the university's general education curriculum [13]. A syllabus is more than a description of a single course. It not only describes how a course is delivered and evaluated, but also reflects the outcomes of the program and the university, and ultimately, student learning.

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