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“Nothing About Us Without Us”:

Syllabus as Genre, Syllabus as Text, Syllabus as of Merit, Syllabus as Seen by Students

Too often, the syllabus itself and previous research about the syllabus are *about students without students*. I am interested in what the syllabus *does*. This proposed study is motivated by thinking about the relationship between syllabi and students, by considering the true purposes and possibilities of course syllabi, and by wanting syllabi to receive much more attention as an important texts. Specifically, this project seeks working answers to two underexplored questions: What impacts do course syllabi have on undergraduate learning in the United States? What makes for a more effective syllabus? “Impact” being measured by grades, by graduate rates, and especially, by self-reported satisfaction. Data for self-reported satisfaction will come from IRB-approved interviews and anonymous surveys with faculty and with students. This study will also utilize rhetorical analysis of course syllabi. For this study, syllabi for introductory gender studies courses will be the focus. The initial study will focus on sections at the University of Houston, as there are ten professors, each with the academic freedom to shape the syllabus with complete control and who have very different documents.

Such research is needed because of the continued dearth of literature. Much of the current literature on the course syllabus is more exploratory with goals of starting more conversations. The syllabus impacts every class, every student, every professor in on-going tangible and

intangible ways, yet scholarship on the syllabus mostly remains limited to intragroup conversations and debates about what the syllabus should and should not include, to the specific tone used, to brief laboratory experiments, or to the corresponding history and philosophy. Existing scholarship often recognizes that the syllabus is one of the first introductions a student has to a given class and can serve to intimidate or welcome people into a new class, for example, but this collective research does not include the voice of students. When student voices do approach inclusion, they are in the form of formulas, numbers, percentages, and ratios—abstract to the non-statistician—from controlled experiments. With the recent publication of *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything*, scholarship has only just begun looking specifically at what the syllabus does.

Annotated Bibliography

Albers, Cheryl. “Using the Syllabus to Document the Scholarship of Teaching.” *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2003, pp. 60-72. Albers argues that course syllabi deserve attention: Professors should spend time writing them, and other people—students and other professors—should give them close readings. In particular, she wants scholars to see the course syllabus as a form of scholarship (and de facto teaching philosophies) that has thoughtful arguments about the relevant field, that teaches methods, that addresses the big pictures, and that needs regular updating. Albers recognizes that such course artifacts serve multiple audiences simultaneously and that the varying levels of academic freedom faculty have while composing the syllabus impacts possible uses of the syllabus. Albers’s scholarship justifies my research because through my use of interviews and rhetorical analysis, we can examine how much thought relevant players actually invest in

course syllabi. Albers focuses more on possible visions; my proposed research is more interested in what existing syllabi do. Depending on the specific directions interviews and surveys take, there might be room to look at how these basic course documents speak to current best practices/trends in the field of pedagogy (not just trends in the subject at hand).

Fornaciari, Charles J. and Kathy Lund Dean. "The 21st-Century Syllabus: From Pedagogy to Andragogy." *Journal of Management Education*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2014, pp. 701-723.

Fornaciari and Dean, business management faculty, noticed the scarcity of literature on what the syllabus *does* and decided to help correct this with a goal of making the syllabus more relevant. They spend significant time reviewing what they call the four core types of syllabi (contract, power instrument, signaling device, and collaboration), justifying their decision to rethink the syllabus, and discussing the fear of administrative wrath. Of note, they justify their desire to consider syllabus changes by creating artificial, outdated divides between pedagogy and andragogy and by relying on clichés about present-day students. Fornaciari and Dean write about their experiment. They include their before and after syllabus verbiage about basic administrative matters with brief commentaries. They argue that shifts to "we" and other more inclusive language make for more receptive documents but provide no evidence except one positive student quotation. Their research is important groundwork for my proposed study because I seek to get direct, detailed feedback from students through oral interviews and aim to use methods of rhetorical analysis to specifically consider the implications of how the syllabus itself is worded and arranged—for example, what are the differences and implications of having information about accessibility at the beginning of the syllabus compared to toward the end.

Gin, Logan E., et al. "It's in the Syllabus...or is it? How Biology Syllabi Can Serve as Communication Tools for Creating Inclusive Classrooms at a Large-Enrollment Research Institution." *Advances in Physiology Education*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2021, pp. 224-240. Gin, et al. begin by questioning the common mantra that the "syllabus is contract" and by commenting on the lack of scholarly work on such. They argue that the course syllabus is an important tool in providing students, especially first generation or non-traditional, what they deem "cultural capital" within the world of higher education. Further, they argue that syllabi can and should promote inclusivity and that such documents are vital in the process of acculturating students to college, both in and out of classrooms. Gin, et al. examined ninety-two biology syllabi to get cumulative data on what content is really included. In general, they report finding wide variations. They actually advocate for longer syllabi that include as many specific details about the course and about campus resources as possible. This research justifies my proposal because of the needed addition of praxis: Does the syllabus help students become informed citizens of the university? Only talking with actual students can give light to that.

Harnish, Richard J. and K. Robert Bridges. "Effect of Syllabus Tone: Students' Perceptions of Instructor and Course." *Social Psychology of Education*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2011, pp. 319-330. As psychologists, Harnish and Bridges wanted to merge research focused on perception and on pedagogy to understand when and how learning does and does not happen in the college classroom. They surveyed 172 students in Introduction to Psychology to understand how the tone used in a syllabus impacts the perceptions students have of their professor and have of the curriculum in general. Harnish and Bridges divided students into two groups. The core part of their research involved giving

one group an example syllabus written in a “warm tone”; the other group received the same basic example but written in a “cold tone.” Their quantitative survey results conclusively show that “tone” does impact student perceptions. This study does not measure any associated learning or engagement but assumes positive correlations between friendly tones, positive perceptions, and productive, engaged learning. Harnish and Bridges’s research justifies my study because an important next step to have more comprehensive insights on how the syllabus impacts the classroom and learning is to move research beyond laboratory circumstances. My study also makes the additional use of qualitative data, which allows for more open-ended responses.

Overman, Amy A., et al. “What Do Students Actually Pay Attention to and Remember From a Syllabus? An Eye Tracking Study of Visually Rich and Text-Based Syllabi.” *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2020, pp. 285-300. Overman, et al. are an interdisciplinary team of researchers who set out to study why students do not retain what that read in course syllabi. To measure retention, they gave fifty-six psychology students a two-page mock literature syllabus. Half received a text-only version; half received a version with the addition of color, graphs, and varying fonts. Software tracked participants’ eye movements. After reading the syllabus, Overman et al. immediately gave participants a test to see what they remembered from the syllabus. Based on their results, these researchers argue that the format of the syllabus does not impact students. In contrast to this study, my proposal is interested in the specifics of what a syllabus does, will not rely on an artificially short syllabus by present-day standards, and will use actual students in an actual class. I also question the initial assumption that students do not retain information from course syllabi, even if what they

retain is mainly impressions. Further, I am less concerned with students accurately remembering the contents of the syllabus as they can almost always reference an electronic or physical copies.