# Sometimes More is More: Adding a Course Manual to Your Syllabus

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a rationale, as well as practical guidelines, for incorporating a "Course Manual" into the standard course syllabus. The primary goal is to simultaneously increase student success and decrease faculty workload. Relevant literature on effective syllabus construction is reviewed. A novel approach, based on the application of lean principles and strategies, is proposed to reduce student frustration and capitalize on intrinsic motivation. Common benefits for both students and faculty are described, and sample content is provided

It's in the syllabus. For the modern professor feeling exasperated, exhausted, or even just a little snarky, this phrase is available for purchase on coffee mugs, decals, t-shirts, and more. Why is the expression so popular as to have achieved meme status?

First, because it is true.

And second, because that's not good enough

### *It Is True*

A lot of information is "in the syllabus". That's why we say it to students, over and over. In addition to instructor information and course details, the syllabus has become a repository for institutional policies designed to protect against conflict. In my culture, we use the delightful slang-term, Cover Your Ass (CYA), when referring to verbiage designed "to protect [our]selves from possible subsequent criticism, legal penalties, or other repercussions, usually in a work-related or bureaucratic context" (Cover your ass, 2024, para. 1). These policies often "speak" in legalese which is "the formal, technical language of legal documents that is often hard to understand" (Oxford Languages, n.d., para. 1). In sum, much of the syllabus is painfully boring, practically unreadable, and downright adversarial (Wasley, 2008; Singham, 2005).

In addition to institutional intrusions, well-intentioned professors may use the syllabus to offer preventative advice in a desperate effort to dissuade future students from repeating the mistakes of past students. This tendency to add additional helpful admonitions each time a creative student startles us with a novel transgression is referred to as "syllabus creep" (Wasley, 2008).

So, yes, a lot of information is in the syllabus. However, some of the information is important, but only for a few students. Some are important, but only at a later point in time. And some information in the syllabus is probably not important, for anyone, ever.

### *Not Good Enough*

The fact that much important information is "in the syllabus" is not good enough to convince most students to sift through the detritus of legalese, reactive policy, and untimely minutiae (Smith & Razzouk, 1993). While it is satisfying to credit our students with full responsibility for this situation, some professional self-reflection is warranted. D'Antonio (2007) reviewed 400 syllabi and found such a lack of clarity and attention to detail, that she accused faculty of laziness and questioned whether some of us even care about our students. Ouch.

Furthermore, even when it's well-written, by the time administrators, lawyers, and harried professors have had their way with it, the standard syllabus presents as boring, irrelevant, and antagonistic (Singham, 2005). Of course students don't read it. Let's face it, most of us are drowning in the fine-print of contemporary life, much of which we wisely leave unread. Not reading some of the things we are technically supposed to read is a critical life-skill, without which not much of value would get done.

As knowledge workers, we are only effective if others make use of what we contribute (Drucker, 2006). As applied educators, we regularly use the consumer-lens to evaluate our students' work. If our students produce goods or services that clients, patients, or customers wouldn't value, we question the student's performance. If we offer a syllabus that our students won't use, we should question our own performance.

### *Motivation Matters*

Because the syllabus is important, we endeavor to convince, cajole, and even coerce students to read it. We contrive motivators, such as syllabus quizzes, scavenger hunts, and signed attestations (Smith & Razzouk, 1993; Wasley, 2008; Raymark & Connor-Greene, 2002). But this approach tends to amplify an acrimonious climate without actually promoting meaningful recall or usage (Smith & Razzouk, 1993; Wasley, 2008).

I am an educator at heart, but my chosen subject is psychology. Psychological research can inform our efforts to motivate. Research on human motivation has identified an important distinction between intrinsic motivation, which occurs when a person is motivated because they internally value an activity, as opposed to extrinsic motivation, which derives from external pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Research suggests that whenever feasible, we should cultivate intrinsic motivation, because intrinsic motivation leads to increased sustained effort (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This requires intentionality.

Research in the field further distinguishes three subcategories of intrinsic motivation (Howard, et al., 2020):

- "Motivation to Know" leverages scintillating information that people naturally want to learn more about. A syllabus is unlikely to rise to this standard.
- "Motivation for Fun" capitalizes on a sense of excitement or stimulation when engaging with a task. Again…not likely attainable for the act of reading a course syllabus.
- "Motivation to Accomplish" emanates from the sense of fulfillment that flows from trying to accomplish something. The best way to increase this type of motivation is to induce a feeling of competence during the action (Howard, et al., 2020). This is exactly what a syllabus should be doing anyway.

The purpose of this paper is to describe an approach to syllabus construction that is deliberately designed to prioritize student competence and motivation, while simultaneously streamlining faculty workload.

### Is Less More?

One might be inspired by the recent resurgence of minimalist design to adopt an extreme decluttering approach and just trash the vast majority of syllabus content, leaving a more manageable product. While this does sound fun, in a reckless sort of way, it is unadvised for several reasons.

First, the problem with "CYA" policies is that they are "only" there to cover your derriere. The problem with eliminating them is that you leave your butt buck-naked. In the modern work environment this state of (un)dress is nearly as imprudent as showing up to work in the nude. In particular, as applied educators, we coordinate innovative, engaged, authentic learning experiences in the interest of better learning. In doing so, we often accrue some elevated risk (Waters, 2020). We have the right to clothe ourselves in a little legalese.

In addition to protecting faculty interests, administrators and students benefit from detailed syllabi, as well. Administrators commonly use the syllabus to mediate disagreements and appeals (Wasley, 2008). And empirical studies indicate that students respond positively to a well-constructed, detailed syllabus (Palmer, et al., 2016; Saville, et al., 2010; Wasley, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2019).

Finally, culling content precipitates a downward spiral of uselessness. The more content you jettison, the less likely the syllabus has the answers students need, so the less competent students feel when using it, so the less they read it, so the more content you delete, rendering it even less likely to meet student need. Less information in the syllabus means less risk management, less clarity and care, and less intrinsic motivation. When it comes to the syllabus, less is just less.

### More is More

Instead of less, add more. Instead of creating an important syllabus, and begging students to read it, create a syllabus so absolutely essential that students must read it to participate in class at all. At first, students will use the syllabus because there is no other choice (extrinsic motivation). Over time, the well-designed syllabus increases student competence, which generates intrinsic motivation to keep using it. We'll distinguish this type of syllabus from common practice by referring to it as a "Course Manual." The Course Manual includes more information, but also more thoughtful effort and more organization and care for the student experience.

If we want our students to use the syllabus, we need to make it genuinely **useful and user-friendly** (Waters, 2023). However, syllabi are rarely designed to optimize utilization (D'Antonio, 2007). Sometimes they are barely designed at all. In contrast, a Course Manual is deliberately designed to respond to empirical research on effective syllabus design by:

- Providing and modeling organization and clarity for students (D'Antonio, 2007).
- Avoiding overloading students with too much information early in the term (Smith & Razzouk, 1993).
- Providing robust, transparent activity descriptions, detailed

schedules, and a success-oriented tone (Palmer, et al., 2016).

- Research indicates that following these principles of effective syllabus design yields improved outcomes:
- Reducing student anxiety (Wasley, 2008).
- Encouraging students to approach instructors for help when needed (D'Antonio, 2007; Blowers, 2002).
- Supporting active learning endeavors (Palmer, et al., 2016).
- Reducing the frequency and validity of complaints and appeals (Blowers, 2002).
- Increasing student perceptions of instructor, course, and the syllabus itself (Palmer, et al., 2016).

The difference between a standard syllabus and Course Manual is one of both content and organization. Commonly, standard syllabus content is arranged according to category and incomplete in nature. Policies are front-loaded, assignment requirements are alluded to, specific expectations are hinted at. And the whole thing is presented on Day One of the semester as a massive bolus for students to gulp down in a single swallow. This is poor design, and clearly a waste of time, else faculty wouldn't need t-shirts proclaiming "It's in the syllabus."

In contrast, a Course Manual is designed according to basic lean principles. Simply put, lean refers to a deliberate approach to improving work quality by reducing any wasted efforts. A Course Manual is built on a foundation of two specific lean principles, using two specific lean strategies.

### Lean Principles.

Two underlying principles of lean philosophy serve as a foundation for a Course Manual:

- Prioritize the customer experience (George, 2004). If a product or service is not valued by the customer, it is waste. In academia, we have many stakeholders, but for syllabus construction, the key "customer" is clearly the student. We should care about their experience, and model this care for them in the same way we expect them to care for the experience of their future customers, clients, or patients. The standard syllabus is wasteful in two ways. First, it wastes students' time because it's not useful or user-friendly. Second, the standard syllabus risks the further waste incurred every time we lose a student through overwhelm, demoralization, or failure. While our relationship with students is complicated in that we both serve and evaluate them, the simple truth is that if we have no students, we don't get to be educators. Many regions are experiencing a proliferation of educational opportunities along with demographic trends leading to fewer people pursuing these opportunities. Prioritizing the quality of the student experience is good

pedagogy, good modeling, and good sense.
- Improving processes improves quality of service (good for students) while also conserving resources (great for faculty). Making the flow of information through a Course Manual more deliberate and strategic means that students get better value and faculty waste less time dealing with confused students (George, 2003).

### Lean Strategies

The under-used syllabus becomes a useful Course Manual when two key lean strategies are employed:

- In service work, creating a knowledge repository is critical to high performance (Price, et al., 2011). This repository should be well-organized, easily accessed, and comprehensive. In this paper, we use the concept of a "One-Stop-Shop" to apply this strategy to syllabus design.
- In any endeavor, we can improve quality of performance by limiting how much work is allowed into the process at a time (George, 2003). Ultimately, by slowing down the flow of material (in this case, information) into a system (i.e. Course Manual), we can produce higher quality outcomes, more quickly. In this paper, we use the concept of "Just-In-Time" (Canel, et al., 2000) to apply this strategy to syllabus design.

By combining the concepts of One-Stop-Shop and Just-in-Time, we create a Course Manual that provides in-depth, detailed information arranged according to the time information is actually needed.

### One-Stop-Shop

In my culture, a "One-Stop-Shop" is a marketplace that provides everything one is likely to need on a typical shopping trip. Eggs, bread, socks, onions, soap, pencils, prescription medication, etc. You can get just about everything you need by stopping at just one shop. It's convenient and user-friendly. I use the term "One-Stop-Shop" here to describe a document that allows students to access nearly every detail that faculty are willing to provide to support student success, without having to hunt, skip, or click around to different sources.

The Course Manual should not include actual "readings" (e.g. textbooks, articles), "listenings" (e.g. podcasts), or "watchings" (e.g. lectures, slides). But it should include virtually everything else the professor shares about how to perform effectively in the course, including due dates, instructions, expectations, rubrics, relevant policies, hints, strategies, etc. Task guidelines should be provided in full detail using a clear, predictable structure, such as the TiLT model (Transparency in Learning and Teaching; Winkelmes, 2023). The One-Stop-Shop approach is particularly useful for applied learning activities, which often entail complicated processes over time. Compiling all the critical information into one document serves to 1) reduce the likelihood of a student

mis-stepping, and 2) protect faculty from accusations of negligence if students do mis-step.

Importantly, there should be just one One-Stop-Shop. All the critical information should be in the Course Manual and only in the Course Manual. Redundant information across multiple sources allows the students to squeak by without building the early habit of referring to the Course Manual. For example, if an online discussion board has instructions posted on the welcome page, some students will participate without referring to the Course Manual. Instead, students should have no idea what to do without referring to the Course Manual. The instruction section of a Discussion Board, Drop Box, or Quiz should simply provide clear instructions on exactly where, how, and why to locate the Course Manual. All other instructions should be found in the Course Manual and nowhere else. In a face-to-face course, the Course Manual is reviewed constantly in class to guide daily activities and the introduction of any new tasks. Students quickly come to understand how valuable it is.

### Just-in-Time

"Just-in-Time" is a concept originally coined to describe a lean approach to reducing waste in the manufacturing sector (Canel, et al., 2000). Instead of wasting space and resources storing product before a customer has ordered it, Just-In-Time manufacturers maintain readiness to produce the product as it is requested. In our case, we use the concept to design a syllabus that avoids wasting student bandwidth on course details before they actually need them. In contrast to the standard syllabus, Course Manuals are arranged in the same way a student's reality is organized…into units of time with specific tasks for each unit. Instead of flooding students with what feels like "fine print" at the beginning of the semester and expecting them to store it until relevant, the Course Manual offers exactly what students need to know exactly when they need to know it. Information that feels antagonistic or overwhelming at the beginning of the semester suddenly feels relevant and helpful when offered at the right time. For example, the policy on plagiarism is more meaningful the week students start working on their capstone papers; the process for addressing ethical transgressions feels more relevant just before students enter a field placement.

The Course Manual is divided into whatever time units make sense for the curriculum (Days, Weeks, or simply "Modules" with specified dates) and every single item of information that students need for successful completion of the unit is included in a step-by-step manualized guide. Compared to the standard syllabus, the Course Manual offers substantially more information, but presented in manageable bites just when the student needs it.

### *Sample Format*

Obviously, my colleagues in applied education represent a rich and diverse

set of fields and it is impossible to provide examples relevant to all.  But here are some guidelines and examples of application.

 **First Section:  Mandatory Syllabus Content.** In the first pages, the Course Manual reflects the minimal information required by the institution or profession to meet either of two goals, 1) for students to have a successful first day of class, and 2) for you to meet your "CYA" requirements. That's it. It should be kept to a minimum. Furthermore, this section should be reviewed only to the extent it is actually useful. If a policy must be included but is unlikely to improve student outcomes, you can cursorily mention it. If some content will eventually be important, but not quite yet, then ignore it now and repeat it in a future section of the Course Manual when it is actually useful. If some content is truly valuable on the first day, by all means review every word. Content in this section might include course title, required materials, university mission and policies, links to professional code of ethics, etc.

 **Second Section: Course Manual.** The second section is the actual Course Manual, which should be clearly demarcated and boldly labeled so that students can discern its unique importance. It should provide highly detailed information (One-Stop-Shop) arranged according to the time it is needed (Just-in-Time). Application is discipline-dependent, but an excerpt from an applied learning course is provided here:

 **Week 3: All activities due midnight Sunday, February 24**
All materials and links are in the Week 3 Module in Canvas.

- Attend your site as scheduled.
- Check your Log: You should have at least 15 hours logged by the end of this week. If you are falling behind, contact your instructor immediately for problem-solving.
- As always, if an ethical or safety concern arises at your site, work with your site supervisor to manage the concern and then contact your instructor immediately to schedule a conversation. Remember, you should document the details of any concern in your own notes, but do not include specific information in any email message; we will consult by phone, zoom, or office appointment.
- Read the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct ("Ethics Code") linked in Canvas.
- Watch the Ethics in Action VideoLecture.
- Take the Ethics Code Quiz in Canvas.
    - Purpose: The purpose of this quiz is to familiarize yourself with the ethics code, not to have memorized the code.
    - Task: This quiz is a learning tool; thus it is "open-book" and you are encouraged to refer to the code itself as you are completing it. It is untimed, and you should plan a block of at least one hour. It consists of Multiple Choice, Short Answer, and Short Essay questions. Your instructor is available for assistance with the quiz by email, phone,

zoom, or office hours. If you want assistance before the quiz is due, you need to reach out before Wednesday at 5 pm so we have time to coordinate our calendars.

○ Criteria: Because this is an untimed, open-book quiz, it will be graded rigorously. You should use official terminology from the Ethics code itself, and your essay answers should provide enough detail and explanation for me to know you understand how the concepts are applied. Your work does not need to be professionally edited, but to receive credit, it must be organized and readable enough for me to easily understand. If you wish to refer to a relevant real-world example from your fieldwork in your answers, remember to not include any personally identifying client information. Breaking client confidentiality for this assignment will result in a grade of zero. Don't hesitate to contact your instructor with questions about this!

● Reflect over the next few weeks on the application of the Ethics Code to your own fieldwork. In Week 6, you will participate in a Discussion Board where you will be expected to identify three Ethical Standards from the Code that are the most challenging to follow at your specific site, and explain why you chose them (specific details are in Week 5 of this Course Manual). Spend the next two weeks of fieldwork reflecting on this question so that you are ready to discuss later.

Within this sample, you can see clear instructions and criteria for students, provided exactly when they most need it to be successful. In addition, you find unapologetic "Cover-Your-Ass" content relating to risk management and confidentiality; but while this content may land like "legalese" on the first day, it takes on greater import for any student facing actual issues in the field.

### *This Seems Like a Lot of Work*

Yes. It is a lot of work at first. But once developed, the Course Manual reduces faculty workload by streamlining course preparation and implementation, reducing student confusion and queries, and increasing student competence and confidence. Following are a few of the common benefits to students and faculty.

● Research indicates that a carefully constructed, detailed syllabus yields higher student perception ratings (Palmer, et al., 2016; Saville, et al., 2010; Wasley, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2019), which streamlines faculty tenure and promotion endeavors.

● Once constructed, the Course Manual services does double duty as a student guide and instructor lesson plan. I rely on it just like my students do.

● By only providing information in a single "One-Stop-Shop,"

faculty are less likely to make errors when revising course material. One source of information is simply easier to keep track of.
- Once students understand the import of the Course Manual, they make fewer errors and have fewer queries for faculty.
- Students who are absent have a built-in guide for getting caught up more independently.

A Course Manual supports better risk management by presenting critical information in a format more accessible and more timely. When students do manage to make a poor choice, it is much harder to place the blame on faculty negligence. Eventually, the work invested in a Course Manual yields a better learning experience for students and reduced workload for faculty.

### *Caveats*

The Course Manual is not particularly flexible. Once disseminated, frequent revisions would be disconcerting and confusing. This tool is best used in a structured, well-developed curriculum. The Course Manual reduces student confusion, but not right away. Students who are unaccustomed to truly useful syllabi may need several prompts to access the Course Manual before they are intrinsically motivated to use it. This problem is best ameliorated by simply responding to all queries by showing the students exactly where to find the information in the course manual, rather than answering the question itself. This is an echo of the "It's in the Syllabus" trope, with two critical differences. First, I recommend a respectful, friendly tone, similar to what you would expect your students to use in the field. Second, the Course Manual is intrinsically motivating so that once students start to use it, they keep using it without additional reminders. Students who take multiple courses with the same instructor will start the next term strong. Over time, the positive impact builds on itself for both students and teachers.

### *Conclusion*

A Course Manual, while requiring substantial initial investment of time and energy, can ultimately improve student-teacher relations, enhance student achievement, and reduce the burden of hassles caused by the inadequate organization of standard syllabi.