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Getting the Message Across to Students: Multimedia Syllabi

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For a student, a syllabus is the source of the first, and often lasting, impressions of a course. It can show that the instructor has spent time planning and organizing the course, and that he/she really cares, which is an effective tool for motivating the students. It is above all a means for improving communication between the instructor and the student. What information to include in the syllabus and how to formulate it verbally has been the subject of several articles and technical reports available in the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Faculty Development. Layout and use of media other than text, potentially of importance to conveying the message of the syllabus, have to my knowledge received little or no coverage.

This paper describes a syllabus skeleton that I have developed recently and some of the methods that I have used there that seemed to work. Since my syllabi were met with much interest on the part of my faculty colleagues and were liked by the students, I hope that describing them may prove useful for a wider audience.

The Cover Page

The cover page of the syllabus contains a picture that reflects the leading theme of the course. The syllabus for the Database Management Systems course contains the drawing of a file cabinet — databases are computer systems that allow for efficient storage and retrieval of information. The cover page of the Research Design course syllabus contains a drawing of flasks and test tubes — research design's main subject is how to design and conduct empirical studies. I adopted the idea of a front page picture from Dr. Michael Spring and I believe that it is very useful — the cover page is instrumental in setting the spirit of the entire syllabus.

The Purpose of the Course

As repeatedly stressed in the literature on syllabi preparation (e.g., [1, 2]), a good syllabus should go beyond giving basic information about the course requirements and structure and spelling out the rules. It should also put the course in a proper perspective, explaining how and where it fits in the overall structure of the program and how it will benefit the students. I believe that this information should be given a prominent place in the syllabus. My syllabi start with a page that covers this information.

The Body: Balancing the Coverage with Clarity

There are two ideas that I find central to the body of any syllabus: (1) an exhaustive coverage of the organizational issues, various policies, and work requirements, along with useful advice about how to learn in the course to be successful, and (2) preserving clarity and the ease with which information can be located. These two goals are in conflict, as an exhaustive coverage leads easily to overflowing the students with too much information and, in effect, decreasing the effectiveness in communicating the important issues. My syllabi attempt to solve this problem by dividing the body into short pieces devoted each to a single message and making these pieces visible by placing them next to an icon expressing the same idea. For example, the

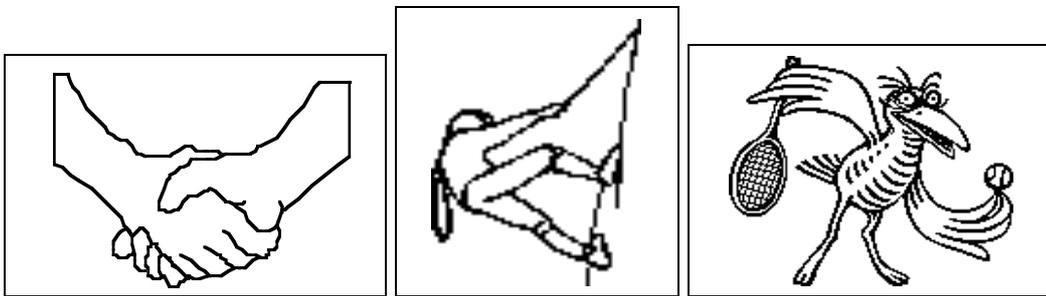


Figure 1: Example icons from the syllabus “Class rivalry” (left), “Students with disabilities” (center), and “In class activity” (right).

text dealing with the required readings is assisted by a picture of a book, the text outlining the computer requirements is assisted by an icon of a computer. There are also less obvious icons associated with abstract concepts, such as student collaboration or in-class activity. Examples of three of such icons are given in Figure 1. The leftmost expresses one of the foundations of my teaching philosophy: students should see each other as colleagues rather than competitors. This particular idea seems to have been conveyed quite effectively. Several students in my database class indicated in an informal anonymous feedback during the semester that this is what they liked the most about the class. The students seem to be very helpful towards their classmates and the average level of the class’ academic achievement is high. The middle icon points to the basic information about special facilities for disabled students. The rightmost icon is associated with an explanation what I mean by in-class activity. I found that chunking the text into fairly independent pieces equipped with icons makes it easy to locate relevant text. As there are usually only about four icons on a page and their meaning is quite obvious, this is easily done by flipping through the syllabus.

The Body: Making Hard Rules Acceptable

The literature on syllabi writing warns against syllabi that merely outline rules and regulations. By taking this advice further, I believe that one should make sure that the part outlining the rules is not too dry for the students — they may get discouraged for the course by the impression that the instructor is an inflexible rule-enforcer. On the other hand, rules are needed to create a framework for effective interaction: Can assignments be turned in late; what is the instructor’s view on collaboration between students; how are the grades determined; are they negotiable, etc.?

One way that I believe softens the impact of hard rules is to justify them and to present them in a slightly funny way. An example of a rule that I introduced to reduce haggling about grades is presented in Figure 2.



It is somewhat embarrassing to talk about this issue, but since haggling does happen, I would like to outline my view in order to avoid possible surprises. Increasing your grade because “you need it” is out of question. As far as your work is concerned, I promise to grade it thoroughly and fairly. If you believe that I have made a mistake in grading your work, please see me and I will be glad to look at it again. In fairness to the rest of the class and to me, I will sit down at the negotiation table with you under one condition that you will have to accept a-priori: if you come with a complaint about my grading in one part of your assignment, I will review the entire assignment again regardless of whether this will lead to an increase or decrease of your score (the latter may happen if my review indicates flaws in your work that I had not noticed before). This makes us equal partners in the negotiation, as it changes your position from “no-lose” to what I believe to be a more reasonable one (note that haggling about the grades is generally unfair as few students point out errors on the part of the grader that benefited their grade).

Figure 2: Softening a hard message: Haggling about grades is not welcome.

Going Truly Multimedia: Electronic Syllabi

Developments in electronic document representation make it possible to move entirely from the traditional hard copy syllabi towards electronic multimedia documents that can be accessed by the students in one of the university’s computer labs. There are several advantages of electronic syllabi (next to saving trees by reducing the amount of paper). They are cheaper for the departments given tight budgetary constraints and they are always up to date. Availability and increasing popularity of computer networks offer possibilities that we have not even thought to be feasible only a few years ago. Electronic documents can include a variety of media, such as a mixture of text and graphics as in the syllabus presented in this paper. They make it also possible to include voice and animation. World Wide Web network allows for linking documents and moving from one to the other simply by clicking a mouse. It is possible, for example, to provide links from the syllabi to the source documents, documents describing the authors, guest lecturers, or other relevant information.

Even though I have not moved my syllabi to electronic media yet, I have created World Wide Web pages for the classes that I am teaching. My home page contains information about me including a picture and voice files teaching the correct pronunciation of my name (I do need this with my name!). The basic information on each of the courses that I teach along with a PostScript version of the syllabus can be retrieved electronically.

Conclusion

I have presented a skeleton syllabus that I have developed recently, that attracted the attention of my faculty colleagues and seemed to be liked by my students. Its main innovative features are (1) organizing it’s contents in small chunks of text assisted by graphical icons, which increased the clarity of the document, and (2) making some of the harder rules for the course more acceptable by explaining their rationale and presenting them in a funny way aided by graphics.

An example of my syllabus is on file in the Office of Faculty Development. My syllabi can be obtained electronically through my World Wide Web pages (the address can be found on the front page of this document). I plan further improvement of the syllabi, so any suggestions will be appreciated.

One gradient that I plan on following is to supplement the syllabus with documents describing various aspects of academic life, such as the strategy for note taking, exam and homework writing, finding a research problem, whether or not to do a M.S. thesis, preparing for the preliminary doctoral examinations, finding a faculty advisor, writing research proposals, financing the studies, presenting projects and research results in front of an audience (giving a seminar, a conference presentation, or a poster presentation), etc. Surprisingly (I believe it may be surprising only for a junior faculty like me) entering students often lack these elementary skills and often do not even realize that they lack them. Currently, I catch myself explaining the same simple things to every new student and realizing only after the conversation that I had forgotten to mention important information. With informative and accessibly written documents on topics that are relevant for the course and supplement the course syllabus, the interaction with new students could concentrate on more important issues. I have already started collecting information for these documents and will start writing them as time permits. I hope to make these documents and my syllabi available electronically through World Wide Web pages. They will be normally read on a computer screen and converted into a printed document by the students only if necessary.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Spring for the initial inspiration to devote a chunk of my time to develop an effective syllabus and for setting a good example with his excellent syllabi. The Office of Faculty Development made examples of syllabi and other teaching material readily available when I needed them. Dr. Laurie Richlin provided valuable feedback on an early version of the syllabus and repeatedly encouraged me to submit a description of the syllabus to this conference.

References

- [1] James O. Hammons & Jack R. Shock. The course syllabus reexamined. *Journal of Staff, Program, and Organization Development*, 12(1):5-17, Summer 1994.
- [2] Joseph Janes & Diane Hauer. Now what? Readings on surviving (and even enjoying) your first experience at college teaching. *The Teaching Assistant Program of the Graduate School, Syracuse University*, Copley Publishing Group: Acton, Massachusetts, 1988.