Summary

This article discusses the nature of and way to create a learner-centered syllabus. Over time, the syllabus has been seen as many things: a contract, a record of course content and requirements; and, more recently, a cognitive map and learning tool that provides a layout of the course and an explanation of how to succeed. While all of these purposes may have merit, they do not constitute a learner-centered syllabus, which according to the literature, constitutes “an attempt to create community, a sharing of power and control over what is learned and how it is learned as well as a focus on assessment and evaluation tied directly to learning outcomes.” Moreover, the literature suggests that use of a learner-centered syllabus has considerable benefits including better student-instructor rapport, greater student empowerment and engagement, and ultimately, improved student learning.

Recognizing the utility of this approach, Richmond focuses the bulk of the paper on suggestions geared towards the creation of an effective learner-centered syllabus (LCS). He does so by breaking the LCS down into three critical criteria: creating community, sharing power and control, and developing and expressing learner-centered assessment and evaluation. Richmond goes into great detail in explaining how to explicitly impart these criteria within the syllabus and throughout a course.

Richmond acknowledges that the first criterion of a LCS, creating community, may seem the most surprising and implausible. Yet, Richmond stresses that community building can be effectively created within the body of a syllabus. Instructors may do so in several ways. The first, and simplest, is to give students greater access by providing them with multiple ways of contacting you and explicitly encouraging them to come to office hours. The second technique for building community within the syllabus is to offer rationales for assignments and link them to the course learning objectives. Finally, a sense of community can be imputed through the syllabus by not only encouraging student collaboration, but actually requiring it through a variety of assignments and activities, and by again explaining the purpose of such elements of the class. Importantly, as he does throughout the article, Richmond offers some exceptionally helpful examples and illustrations of how to build these elements into a syllabus and the type of verbiage to employ.

Richmond begins his discussion of the second criterion, sharing power and control, by noting that many instructors may seem threatened by the idea of doing so. Shared power, however, helps create greater community sentiment and thereby produces a more efficient and effective classroom experience. One way to express this shared governance is for an instructor to include his or her teaching philosophy and how it impacts the course in the syllabus. This helps students to understand the instructor’s perception of his or her own role in the class. Similarly, the syllabus should describe the students’ role in the class in a way that goes beyond just completing assignments and participating. Rather, the syllabus should frame the students’ role as playing an integral part in and being responsible for their own learning. Third, the syllabus can san create a sense of shared power by noting that students can and should look
beyond the instructor for the acquisition of knowledge pertinent to the course as well as offer suggestions as to where students can find useful resources for learning. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the instructor can broaden shared control in the syllabus by using language that shifts away from negative references to penalties and loss of points to those that are positive, friendly, and supportive.

The final critical aspect of a learner-centered-syllabus is that it explicitly links evaluation and assessment to the student learning outcomes. As a starting point, Richmond states that a syllabus must have explicit learning outcomes, expressed in learner-centered language. Another relatively simple yet critical means of doing so is to creating a schematic for the course grading system and assignments that lists the related learning outcomes. A second syllabus component that can reinforce this linkage is to a discussion of how and when feedback will be delivered, how students should utilize it, and to note that feedback will be bi-directional. That is to say, the syllabus should indicate that students will be encouraged and/or required to give feedback about assessments, evaluations, and the course to the instructor. Third, Richmond suggests including language in the syllabus that explains the difference between and importance of both cumulative and formative evaluation. Finally, Richmond suggests the importance of allowing students to conduct rewrites of assignments, which only further learning, and expressing this in the syllabus.

Conclusions

In the conclusion of his article, Richmond briefly reiterates the rationale behind and benefits of a learner-centered syllabus. He also provides a six step process for creating one. First, instructors should conduct a review of their current syllabi using a rubric provided in the article. Second, instructors should identify those aspects of their syllabi that they wish to alter. Once they have, they should experiment with more learner-centered elements. Once this work has been accomplished, instructors need to review and assess the changes they have made; the article offers an online resource that can help instructors evaluate the learner-centeredness of their syllabi. Both steps five and six are the same: repeat the process, and then repeat it again constantly.

Applications

Though this article is full of rather thoughtful ideas about the proper nature of a syllabus and detailed suggestions for building a more learner-centered model, there are two potential limits to its utility. The first is that at UDC we have a university mandated template for syllabi that might preclude inclusion of some of the elements discussed in the article. The second is that inclusion of all of the elements discussed by Richmond, as well as those demanded by the university, would seem to necessitate an unwieldy, overly long syllabus that students would be unlikely to read in its entirety. That said, much of what Richmond discusses is still deserving of consideration and broadly applicable at UDC. For one, much of the language emphasized in this article could be incorporated into the template used at UDC. A second potential solution is to essentially create an additional document for students that would be used in conjunction with the fuller syllabus. Third, one could use much of what this article discussed and use it to by and large set the content of the first day of class. Finally, it would seem potentially valuable
to use Richmond’s article as well as additional sources to evaluate UDC’s current syllabus template in order to effectuate systemic change and improvement.

**Citations of Interest**


