

The Syllabus as a Communication Document: Constructing and Presenting the Syllabus

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This interpretive study explored the communicative strategies teachers employ when constructing and presenting course syllabi to overcome challenges teachers face surrounding the syllabus. Data included 13 classroom observations, 19 teacher interviews, and document analysis of the instructors' syllabi. Communication strategies teachers used to welcome students, balance tensions when presenting the syllabus, and focus students' attention during the presentation emerged. The findings offer teachers suggestions on how to present and construct the syllabus more effectively.

Keywords: Syllabus; Competing Tensions; Communication Strategies; Power; Critical Reflection

During the first day in any college classroom, students expect to receive a syllabus detailing assignments, procedures, and requirements for the course. At the same time, the teacher delivers the information orally by emphasizing key points in the document. As written text, the syllabus communicates a great deal (Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Raymark & Conner-Greene, 2002). Beyond the content of the document itself, how the syllabus is presented is critical. As a symbolic message, the presentation of the syllabus communicates what the teacher is like as a person and instructor (Habaneck, 2005; McKeachie, 2002), contributes to students' first impression of the teacher (Baecker, 1998; Grunert, 1997; Smith, 1993), and sets the tone for the course (Grunert, 1997; Matejka & Kurke, 1994). Moreover, the way the teacher discusses the syllabus and elaborates on key issues constitutes important communication decisions (Nilson, 1998; Singham, 2005; Weimer, 2002).

Despite its importance, the presentation of the syllabus has been virtually ignored in research (Baecker, 1998; Smith, 1993). While much has been written about the

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syllabus, the literature has been largely prescriptive in nature, addressing what to include or exclude in the document (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Parkes & Harris, 2002). Extant empirical research focuses on what students attend to in the syllabus (Becker & Calhoun, 1999; Smith & Razzouk, 1993), the purpose of syllabi (Habaneck, 2005), and pronoun usage (Baecker, 1998). Research that focuses on presentational aspects of the syllabus can create a more detailed understanding of the role this document plays in the classroom.

Teachers face several communication challenges when presenting and constructing syllabi. First, teachers must balance the tension between showing students that they are caring, warm and friendly individuals while simultaneously demonstrating that they are serious, task-oriented and evaluative (Baecker, 1998; DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Singham, 2005). Whereas teachers often strive to create a hospitable environment to make students feel welcome the first day of class, they must also establish rules and procedures that illustrate their authority (Baecker, 1998; Singham, 2005). Too often, teachers who look gentle, polite, and concerned at first glance can appear tyrannical when presenting the syllabus (Singham, 2005). Attempts to attend to both faces send mixed messages to students. The hard-nosed stance teachers take to establish authority may be inconsistent entirely with their own teaching philosophies to be open, kind, and welcoming (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). Balancing these competing tensions represents one of the most challenging aspects when presenting the syllabus.

The second communication challenge teachers face is the fact that the syllabus serves several, often conflicting, functions. To begin, the syllabus offers students information about the teacher (Baecker, 1998; Grunert, 1997; Smith, 1993). The syllabus might include information about the instructor's teaching philosophy (Becker & Calhoun, 1999; DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Parkes & Harris, 2002), and how the syllabus is communicated speaks volumes about the teacher's perceived identity (Weimer, 2002; Wolcowitz, 1984). This initial impression of the teacher determines for some students whether or not to remain in the class (Brookfield, 1995; Smith & Razzouk, 1993). The syllabus also functions to provide information about the content of the course. Syllabi routinely include the course assignments, due dates, and book titles (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Parkes & Harris, 2002), as well as course or learning objectives (Habaneck, 2005). More recently, the syllabus functions as a complex legal contract (Singham, 2005), documenting the rules and regulations for the course (Baecker, 1998). As instructors add more rules over the years, the syllabus eventuates into a document that constrains, alienates, and dehumanizes students (Singham, 2005, p. 5). The rules themselves communicate the hidden message that students are disobedient and must be told to behave (Kohn, 1993, p. 26). The language further insults by intimidating the student into obedience: "You must attend class" (Singham, 2005, p. 1). While rules help to assert teacher power and authority (Baecker, 1998; Weimer, 2002), the syllabus document can also serve to welcome students as "the professor can model enthusiasm for the course content and convey a positive invitation to the student to explore learning in the discipline" (Habaneck, 2005, p. 63). Even though instructors must teach the rules when

presenting the syllabus, teachers must simultaneously recognize and encourage student responsibility (Habaneck, 2005; Singham, 2005). In sum, the purpose of the syllabus is multifaceted making the syllabus construction and presentation difficult.

A third challenge for teachers is students' inattentiveness to the syllabus. Most students fail to read the syllabus, refer to it sparingly, and are unable to recall basic information contained in the syllabus (Smith & Razzouk, 1993). Becker and Calhoun (1999) suggested that teachers go over the syllabus thoroughly, focusing students' attention on key issues. In order for students to learn the syllabus, then, teachers need communication strategies that encourage students' attention, comprehension, and retention.

Given the multiple communication challenges involved in both the construction and presentation of the syllabus, this study examines the communication strategies teachers use to both construct and present their syllabi. Therefore, the following research question was asked:

RQ1: What communication strategies do teachers employ when presenting and constructing their course syllabi?

Method

This exploratory study employed an interpretive approach in an effort to gain a more comprehensive, in-depth understanding of teachers' behaviors and meanings regarding the phenomena being studied (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In this way, the intention was to discover and describe the communication strategies teachers use to develop and present their syllabi.

Participants and Instructional Context

I conducted the research with faculty across campus at a large Midwestern university. Email flyers distributed by department chairs requested teachers to participate. Nineteen teachers (8 males, 11 females) participated in interviews and provided syllabi for analysis. Of the sample, 17 teachers were Caucasian, 1 was African American, and 1 was Native American. The instructors represented a variety of disciplines, including biology, journalism, history, anthropology, English, nursing, and others. Both veteran and novice teachers were represented, having taught an average of 16.5 years (range = 1.5 to 39 years). Given overlapping teaching schedules, observing all 19 teachers was not feasible; consequently, 13 teachers' first-day syllabus presentations were observed.

Data Collection

Multiple methods were used to capture an in-depth understanding of those communication strategies teachers use to develop and present their syllabi. Data was obtained from classroom observations of teachers' presentations, semi-structured

interviews with each participant, and each participant's syllabus document. During the in-class observations, I focused on strategies teachers employed during the presentation of the syllabus, including how they negotiated the creation of a hospitable environment while at the same time establishing their authority and focusing students' attention. Because the syllabus represents only a portion of the first day of class, I focused solely on the syllabus presentation, taking detailed field notes. In order to avoid interrupting the nature of the first class period, the presentations were not recorded; however, I made every effort to capture the essence of what was said, and I took notes on key quotations and examples. In all, nearly 40 typed, single-spaced pages of field notes were accumulated.

For the semi-structured interviews, I relied on an interview guide to ensure that all the issues were uniformly addressed for each interview. At times, I diverted from the guide in order to follow up on teachers' comments and, thus, gain a more detailed understanding of their experiences (Bernard, 2000). Teachers were asked open-ended questions about their experiences with syllabi, including the strategies they employ in both construction and presentation. These interviews resulted in 173 pages of text. Theoretical saturation was achieved as no new information was forthcoming (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Finally, each instructor provided his or her syllabus. These documents were used to discover the tone of the document, elements emphasized through textual functions, how language was framed to negotiate power, and strategies teachers used to invite students into the course.

Data Analyses

Field note and interview transcriptions were analyzed following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method using open and axial coding. The interviews were first read in their entirety to create a general sense of the data and were then reread using line-by-line analysis during open coding. Data was categorized into 24 recurring patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During axial coding, I pasted key segments of the data into a word document beneath the corresponding pattern and then compared, revised, and reorganized the data into larger themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through this process, the data was winnowed into three relevant themes by clustering related patterns into subcategories and reducing the data in a systematic manner (Creswell, 2003). After examining each participant's syllabus, I typed 12 single-spaced pages of notes used to identify recurring patterns within the documents. I employed the constant comparative method to these data and integrated these findings into the data from the interviews and observations.

Findings

The interviews, observations, and documents produced a wealth of rich data. Three overall recurring patterns emerged from the data: *welcoming strategies*, *tension balancing strategies*, and *presentational strategies* used to focus students' attention.

These communication strategies helped teachers manage the multiple challenges they face when constructing and presenting their syllabus. Ample excerpts from all three sources of data portray these three strategies.

Welcoming Strategies

The first emergent strategy involved teachers welcoming students to the course. Teachers accomplished this primarily through the presentation, but also via the syllabus document. Teachers devised an array of strategies to welcome students including getting acquainted, being positive, selling the course, and using inclusive language (see Table 1). These welcoming strategies created a favorable first impression of the teacher, as well as overcoming some of the more serious information included in the syllabus by making students feel more comfortable. English instructors placed the greatest emphasis on welcoming by using a variety of strategies. Not all teachers viewed the syllabus as welcoming.

Getting acquainted. First, teachers welcomed students by getting to know them prior to and during the presentation of the syllabus in order to make students feel more comfortable before being inundated with details about the course. Thus, a few of the strategies associated with getting acquainted with students were not exclusive to the syllabus presentation, but rather fit into the larger context of first-day strategies. To begin with, some teachers asked students to introduce themselves before the syllabus presentation: “I always have students before we do anything else . . . we go around the room and introduce everyone. So I try to pick up names even as I’m going through the course syllabus.” Teachers also helped students become familiar with one another through icebreakers such as group activities. One teacher explained, “Students have told me that getting into small groups and coming back to the syllabus in the class knowing the names of four other people” helped them feel more comfortable before receiving a breakdown of the assignments and policies included in the syllabus.

In order to make students feel welcome, some teachers revealed information about themselves and their love of the subject in order to help students feel welcome. For example, one teacher revealed information in the syllabus in a section entitled, “About your instructor,” and another teacher included information about their training, family, and interests. One teacher quipped during the presentation, “I hope you’ll be as interested in me as I am in you.” Teachers also emphasized their love for the subject/course in the presentation in the hope that students would become more excited about the class. One teacher disclosed that “weaving is my passion” while another teacher explained “I teach this course most often because I really like the material.”

Being positive: Encouragement leads to success. In order to overcome the negative tone dominating much of the syllabus, teachers welcomed students by being positive and encouraging. One teacher explained, “I thank them for being here . . . I try to encourage them and say I hope that you will find something in this course that you

Table 1 Welcoming Strategies

Strategy	Document	Presentation
<i>Getting Acquainted</i>		
With Students (all prior to or during presentation)		
Student introductions		X
Icebreakers and small groups		X
Learning names/nametags		X
Letters from students about themselves		X
Student information sheets		X
Go early to meet students before class starts		X
Revealing Teacher Background		
Letters to students	X	
Teacher's love for subject matter/course	X	X
Teaching philosophy	X	X
Teacher's worldview		X
<i>Being Positive</i>		
Encouraging students they will succeed	X	X
Bolstering students' confidence regarding the course	X	X
Emphasizing aspects students' control regarding grades	X	X
Complimenting students		X
Indicate we're taking a journey together	X	X
Stressing willingness to help students succeed	X	X
Letting students know they have valuable insight		X
Specific advice on how to succeed in the course/college	X	X
Using text functions to emphasize student success (bold)	X	
<i>"Selling" the Course</i>		
Importance for future occupation		X
Welcome paragraph/page	X	
Pointing out the skills learned	X	X
Sounding excited		X
<i>Inclusive Language</i>		
Using "our" and "we"	X	X
Meta-communication (i.e., "I will not be intimidating.")		X
Welcoming tone		X
<i>Miscellaneous Strategies</i>		
Trying to create a community		X
Saying welcome		X
Teacher personality		X
Pictures in the syllabus (Stonehenge, flowers)	X	
Teacher Accessibility	X	X

can apply to your own discipline." Teachers stressed the usefulness of the course in the hope that students would become more engaged in the presentation and, hopefully, more motivated to succeed in the course. Teachers also fostered students' confidence to help students overcome fears they might have regarding the course based on the syllabus, "You will say, yes, indeed you can do it," and by emphasizing that students control how they do in the course: "I remind them over half of the graded material is stuff over which they have total control." Further, some teachers complimented students: "You all got here because of good writing, reading. I bet you all love to read." Teachers communicated they care by encouraging students, thus,

combating the more daunting course assignments and grading policies. Teachers also made clear to students that they were willing to help them succeed in the course. One teacher explained “my whole approach that first day is here’s where we are going, I’m going to help you get there,” writing in the syllabus, “You will get a substantial amount of help accomplishing the above.”

In some instances, teachers offered students specific advice about how to succeed in the course via the syllabus document. One teacher created a section in the syllabus entitled, “How to beat the system.” Another pointed out students who attend review sessions “do 7% better” in the exams. Teachers also gave advice about being successful in college in general, for example:

I’ve also included a section on . . . how to be a college student . . . I just got sick and tired of kids who were disconnected and they weren’t hearing it from anybody else. Number one rule, get up and go to school everyday. Number two: be sure the faculty member knows your name . . .

Selling the course. Teachers also welcomed students by “selling” the course, explaining what they will gain from or enjoy in the course. Teachers emphasized the importance of selling the course: “This is what this course is going to do for you, why you need to take it . . . I think often teachers don’t spend enough time reminding why a particular course is important.” Teachers stressed how helpful the class would be for a future job: “I want them to feel like this class isn’t going to be a waste of time. I’m going to really need it for the job I have in the future.” Other teachers welcomed students via the document by including an entire paragraph or page aimed at selling the course. The first line of one syllabus document read, “Welcome to one of the most exciting courses offered . . . anywhere!” Teachers emphasized instructors must sound excited during the presentation: “you’ve got to sound excited . . . I’m selling the course, and it’s my specialty area, and I love my specialty area . . . I perform.” By selling the course, teachers demonstrated they cared about students’ futures and what they would get out of the course in order to make the content of the course seem more relevant and the procedural elements less intimidating. Not surprisingly, journalism and accounting teachers took the greatest efforts in selling their courses modeling for students the importance of this concept in their work.

Inclusive language. Teachers carefully selected the language used in the syllabus and the presentation in order to welcome students. One teacher explained, “I try to use the ‘our’ and the ‘we’ a lot . . . I do use ‘we’ instead of ‘you.’” In the presentation, several teachers selected specific pronouns to emphasize their desire to work with students rather than taking an adversarial stance as the document might suggest: “I try in my language to them to use ‘I’ or ‘you,’ I’m talking to you . . . I’m sharing some thoughts about the class as a person to another person.” Teachers used meta-communication to make students feel comfortable: “Here’s your syllabus, ‘I’ promise not to be intimidating.” The teacher addressed the harsh tone of the language in the syllabus by telling students directly, I am not going to be intimidating during the

presentation, perhaps more significantly communicating that the teacher will not be intimidating during the remainder of the course.

Some teachers used text functions in order to create a more positive tone in the syllabus document. For the most part, teachers emphasized their authority and the seriousness of the course policies via text functions such as bolding or underlining terms. For example, teachers set rules in bold text which they enforced: “Students who talk or make noise when I am talking will be asked to leave this classroom, permanently.” However, in a few instances teachers stressed positive statements by using bold text, “We’ll be working hard, but it will be worth it. I’m glad you’re here!” Teachers rarely used text functions to emphasize the positive, thus, the statements stood out when used.

Tension Balancing Strategies

While teachers identified a variety of welcoming strategies to help students feel more comfortable, they experienced more difficulty in developing strategies to overcome the challenge of establishing their authority while at the same time still communicate they cared about students. The strategies teachers developed to balance the tension were distinct from the welcoming strategies; although it is true these strategies also welcomed students in a sense. Teachers acknowledged their struggle in creating strategies to balance the tension between communicating that they cared and establishing a serious tone during the presentation, commenting, “I’m not sure I manage it well” and “I haven’t come up with any great strategy.” The English teachers who put the greatest emphasis on welcoming strategies also emphasized communicating their authority by making sure students knew the course was serious business: “It is very important on the syllabus to have a very clear presentation of policies, of course . . . you want to be formal to make sure that you have established a tone that sets the stage for the course. This is serious business.” Some teachers placed more importance on communicating their seriousness than being welcoming. One teacher stated, “I don’t want to come off as unfriendly by any means . . . but I’d rather come off as a little more demanding than I’m actually going to be. You can always back off.” Despite the struggle, teachers devised strategies to communicatively manage the tension: softening the blow, rules strategies, and negotiating power (see Table 2).

Softening the blow. Teachers stressed the difficulty of the course; consequently, they softened the blow by telling students they would make it through. Teachers softened the harsh tone by mentioning the necessary requirements in the course but then “muting what sounds overwhelming.” It is important to note that while the teacher reduced the harshness, the teacher did not want to completely de-emphasize the challenging nature of the course: “On the other hand, my classes are a lot of work, so I don’t want that to be masked in anyway.” Other teachers tried to soften the blow by addressing students’ fear of the subject:

Table 2 Tension Balancing Strategies

Strategy	Document	Presentation
<i>Softening the Blow</i>		
Address fear of subject, course, or workload		X
Offer disclaimers about the difficulty of the course		X
Try to point out positives about unpopular courses		X
<i>Rules Strategies</i>		
Keep rules section short	X	
Present the rules section quickly		X
Provide rationale	X	X
Approach the rules positively/lead to achievement		X
Tying the rules to the subject area or future occupations	X	X
Soften tone of voice		X
Teacher persona		X
Using humor		X
Nonverbal cues (smiling, moving around, eye contact, gestures)		X
Reading students' nonverbal cues to adjust tone or add explanation		X
<i>Negotiating Power through the Syllabus</i>		
Offering students choices on assignments, tests, and topics	X	X
Implying students may approach with alternative options		X
Using "we"	X	X
<i>Miscellaneous</i>		
Using stories or examples to break the tension		X
Ask questions to engage students		X

Usually I start out that first day of class, just opening up a little bit and softening the blow . . . One of the things I've found with this class, and I think this is the case with all lower division classes, is that they're afraid, they're just terrified sometimes. And they don't listen. They are just so afraid of a history class . . . so I've found that if I can just break that barrier as soon as possible, then I can get to the learning process. And . . . I present myself as a fairly easy-going and approachable person, so they will come talk to me.

Students' fear heightened the potential for teachers' comments on the difficult nature of the course to be destructive. Teachers attempted to overcome this barrier by addressing students' fears. In unpopular courses, multiple teachers diffused students' concerns:

Gerontology is not one of the more popular courses . . . so it's kind of hard. People come in with expectations . . . I'm not going to like this . . . so we talk about their experiences with older people . . . about demographics and older people and the fact that they may never want to be nurses with older people, but by default every nurse is going to be working with an older person. So I talk a lot about the subject and invite their impressions and their experiences and try to say well now this is what your experience is, how can we twist that.

Teachers counterbalanced the fears generated by the rules, assignments, or content area by addressing students' concerns during the presentation of the syllabus.

Rules strategies. Teachers developed multiple strategies to tone down the intimidating nature of the course rules. The biological sciences and history teachers placed the greatest emphasis on rules strategies. Teachers de-emphasized the rules section by keeping it short or covering the rules quickly in the presentation:

It's done by the intensity and time you devote to it. If you devote essentially your whole first lecture to the rules and regs . . . that's what you get when you go to boot camp. So I try to get through that material in an abbreviated form.

Thus, when covering the rules in the presentation of the syllabus the teacher kept it short so they did not become the focus of the presentation.

In order to deflect some of the seriousness associated with presenting the rules, teachers provided disclaimers and rationale to approach the rules more positively. Teachers gave disclaimers to acknowledge most of the rules would never be an issue for students: "I just recognize that this is something that we have to go through. And sometimes we elaborate on parts and say, generally, this is not an issue." Thus, teachers minimized the intimidating nature of the rules in the syllabus document during the presentation by saying that the serious words in print essentially did not apply to a majority of the students. Additionally, teachers provided students with a rationale for the rules during the presentation, offering students an explanation to illustrate the rules were reasonable. For example, teachers stressed how the rules lead to achievement: "I spend relatively little time on the rule part . . . they are not important in and of themselves. They are important for what they lead us to achieve." One teacher emphasized the rules helped make a difference in students' lives: "I have 50 minutes in which to make a major impact on your life. And so I want you to leave here changed . . . I can't do that if we're distracted." Others tied policies to the subject area or future occupations in the document: "Deadlines are important in journalism and mass communications, so it's important in this class." Teachers emphasized the plagiarism section during the presentation, an extremely challenging endeavor. To address plagiarism with students, teachers explained why plagiarism was important: "It protects other peoples' work, and I try to help them see that means your work. That we should give credit to other people, just as they give credit to us."

Next, teachers used their tone to lighten the mood when reading the rules during the presentation. Tone of voice was critical in striking the balance between being a strict authoritarian and someone students look forward to working with during the semester. Teachers considered the tone used during the presentation carefully: "You work on the tone of voice, work on the parts of that syllabus to emphasize . . . instead of being the authority standing up there and saying you must do this, you must do that." In many instances, teachers' classroom persona reduced the tension: "Tone of voice and demeanor and my teaching presence helps to balance it." Teachers also lightened the tone through humor to balance the tension. One participant indicated

“I make a few jokes, I try to lighten it up. I try to pull it back to them and make it conversational, so I’m not just standing up there reading the rules.”

Teachers also used nonverbal communication to relax the tone during the presentation of the rules. Teachers tried to appear non-threatening: “Don’t be standing . . . hiding behind the podium in the auditorium. Be out in front, be sitting on the edge of the desk with your feet dangling and just talking to them.” Further, teachers watched students’ nonverbal reactions to the presentation in order to regulate the tone when presenting the rules:

Let’s say I go off . . . bitching or becoming scary. I might comment on the nonverbal and say, ‘I don’t want to be overwhelming because it is fun.’ I have expectations, I have standards, but I am approachable. I’m not this mean old whatever, but it is probably not so much pre-planned as it is based upon I sense their reaction . . . people seem super anxious.

By watching students’ reactions, the teacher addressed students’ fears. In sum, teachers’ rules strategies helped to deal with the most challenging issue faced regarding the syllabus, establishing their serious yet caring nature.

Negotiating power. While teachers wanted to create an appearance of authority, they did not want to appear inflexible. Thus, teachers developed another means for balancing this tension: negotiating power in the classroom. One teacher offered students some level of perceived power by “giving them choices, perceived choices . . . that makes them feel like they are in power. They have some control.” Teachers presented students with some level of power to make choices in the class by granting flexibility with assignments: “I always give choices about assignments . . . I will always say if you can think of an alternative to this, you are welcome to bring that up with me.” Teachers tried to make it clear students could approach them with other options. They also granted students some freedom regarding exams, allowing them to “decide if you want a midterm.” Others offered flexibility on the topics covered, realizing not all students need to do the same thing:

Visual literacy class there are so many different areas and channels of communication we can talk about from computers, to ipods . . . I’ve been thinking, why don’t I let the students for the last four weeks maybe choose those chapters they really want to read and maybe do a paper on. And then go from there.

Teachers established authority, but avoided appearing inflexible by making clear in the syllabus document and presentation that they would negotiate authority in the classroom with students.

Presentational Strategies

The third emergent pattern revolved around presentational techniques developed to focus students’ attention on important aspects of the syllabus. Two sub-patterns were identified that helped to keep students’ attention: highlighting key aspects and using classroom technology. These strategies were intended to make students aware of parts

of the syllabus they may not pay attention to or read. Though teachers revealed several presentation strategies, they indicated they wished they had more training on how to present syllabi.

Highlight and elaborate. In order to maintain and focus students' attention during the presentation, teachers highlighted key aspects rather than reading through the entire syllabus. The average length of the presentation of the syllabus was 26.6 minutes with a range from 15 to 40 minutes. The presentation can be dry, making highlighting essential: "I think it's dull . . . I'll hit the highpoints." During the presentation, teachers highlighted and elaborated on expectations for the course like assignments, rules, and grading. Teachers explained requirements for assignments because students were "concerned about what they are going to be expected to do." Teachers also elaborated on specific elements such as plagiarism: "I want them to look at the stuff about plagiarism. I don't read this verbatim, but kind of summarize it. Emphasize how important it is, make sure they understand how this works." By elaborating on specific elements teachers indicated what students should focus on in the syllabus; thus, if students never read or referred to the syllabus the teacher could at least be confident the issue had been covered.

Focusing attention through classroom technology. The observations revealed how beneficial using classroom technology could be during the presentation of the syllabus to maintain students' attention. Teachers used a variety of technological tools including document cameras (Elmo), the school computer system (Blackboard), PowerPoint, and Microsoft Word documents during the presentation. Based on the observations, teachers in journalism, accounting, and textile and design utilized the most technology during the presentation. English teachers did not rely on classroom technology as much, focusing more on getting acquainted with students by moving them into circles to create more of a discussion-oriented atmosphere during the presentation of the syllabus.

Teachers used classroom technology to make syllabus information visible on the screen at the front of the classroom. Some teachers used Elmo and Blackboard to simply show the syllabus itself. Other teachers outlined key aspects of the syllabus using PowerPoint or Microsoft Word so students could follow along in the presentation more effectively. One teacher explained, "I really copied and pasted directly from the syllabus into the PowerPoint . . . what I wanted to accomplish was to go over with them each part so they would see the importance." When teachers outlined specific elements of the syllabus, they made it clear these were the most important parts of the syllabus for students to be aware of regarding the course.

Students clearly paid more attention during the presentation if teachers used classroom technology. When teachers incorporated classroom technology, students focused on the teacher rather than the syllabus document in their hand, which one teacher stressed was important: "I want them to look at me do the PowerPoint." Another teacher commented this was the first semester they put the syllabus up on the screen during the presentation and noticed advantages:

They're watching. I think they just like the fact that it is up and written for them . . . it's up on Blackboard and it's right there . . . that's the first time I've done that. I'm going to do it again. Actually, there are more people paying attention. If I have it up, then they probably look up.

When teachers put the syllabus up on a screen for students to see, they followed more easily what the teacher was saying because the presentation of the syllabus was no different than any other presentation that might occur throughout the semester. Teachers felt more in control of what students focused on in the syllabus because they could use the cursor to direct the students' attention:

They stay with me better. They are not looking ahead, they are not flipping pages, they are not poking each other and saying look at what we have to do. I have more control to step them through this in the way I want them to go through it.

Classroom technology also freed teachers to deliver elements of the syllabus extemporaneously, keeping students more engaged. For example, syllabus outlines on the screen gave teachers more freedom to look at students rather than repeatedly looking down at the syllabus document in their hands. Teachers made far more eye contact with students glancing back at the syllabus on the screen only when necessary, using eye contact to hold students' attention. Teachers became more dynamic in their presentation when the syllabus or outline was on the screen, giving more gestures and moving around the classroom to interact with students. Teachers emphasized the importance of delivery techniques to focus students' attention, especially being active, "walking around, moving, hand gestures, pointing at the screen."

Discussion

Despite the importance of the syllabus and its status as a communication device (Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Raymark & Conner-Greene, 2002), the communication aspects of the syllabus have received almost no scholarly attention. This study marks the initial analysis of syllabi that incorporates observations of teachers presenting their syllabi in order to gain a more holistic perspective of the syllabus as a communication document. The findings underscore the importance of broadening research on syllabi because the observations and interviews provide a wealth of information on communication strategies teachers employ to address the challenges they face surrounding syllabi. The most salient emergent themes helped discover a variety of strategies teachers use to welcome students and communicatively manage the tension between establishing authority and creating a hospitable environment. In addition, learning presentation strategies teachers use to focus students' attention are a critical step in syllabus research.

The exploratory nature of this study provides teachers with a more detailed understanding of teachers' communication strategies for the presentation and construction of the syllabus to deal with the issues they face. First, the findings provide a better understanding of the strategies teachers use to welcome students into the course via the syllabus. As Habanek (2005) suggested, welcoming is indeed an

important purpose associated with the syllabus. The abundance of welcoming strategies teachers developed helped overcome the adversarial relationship that can be created in the syllabus document (Habaneck, 2005; Singham, 2005). The data also revealed additional functions syllabi serve, including selling the course in the document and presentation. Consistent with Brookfield's (1995) advice, a few teachers revealed information about themselves in the syllabus, including their love for the subject area and their teaching philosophies. This supplied students with an initial sense of the instructor's identity (Habaneck, 2005; McKeachie, 2002; Smith & Razzouk, 1993) to help students feel more comfortable. Teachers also occasionally used text functions such as bold font to welcome students by emphasizing specific statements in the syllabus. Most items put in bold were negative, but teachers can create a balance between stressing positives and negatives in the syllabus. For the most part, welcoming strategies were consistent across departments, although English teachers gave a great deal of attention to welcoming students. Perhaps, this is because their courses are more discussion-oriented, making it particularly important to create an open atmosphere.

Second, teachers developed strategies to help communicatively manage the tension that exists between being caring while simultaneously establishing authority and the rigor of the course. Even experienced teachers emphasized how they struggled with this tension. This extends syllabus research as literature has acknowledged the tension exists (Baecker, 1998; Singham, 2005), but the teachers in the study provided important data on the strategies used to deal with this challenge. Teachers came up with creative techniques for addressing these tensions in the presentations, but several desired more training regarding the presentation to develop better strategies. Interestingly, some teachers were more concerned about establishing the seriousness of the course than appearing caring. Consistent with previous research, many syllabi took on a defensive nature rather than serving as a learning tool (Singham, 2005; Becker & Calhoun, 1999; Habaneck, 2005; Parkes & Harris, 2002), though teachers have found way to minimize the negativity through the presentation and the document itself.

Teachers devised a variety of strategies to make the rules less intimidating. These strategies represented the most direct attempt to address the contractual nature of the document. As Singham (2005) suggested, the language in many of these documents is harsh, using imperial commands. Researchers have overlooked that teachers find ways to deflect the negative tone in the rules sections through the presentation. Teachers revealed they have developed techniques to make the rules seem less daunting to students. These strategies may influence how students interpret the rules section of the syllabus. As Singham (2005) argued, students are accustomed to negativity in the syllabus, but teachers' communication strategies help address this norm.

Three rules strategies teachers developed can be especially helpful to teachers. First, teachers explained the rules section as quickly as possible. While past research has focused specifically on the negative, even demeaning, language in the syllabus document (Baecker, 1998), this does not take into account that, when presenting a

syllabus, many teachers spend little time on the rules section. Second, teachers provided disclaimers about how rules included in the document would not be an issue for most students. Disclaimers served as an important communication tool so students would feel as if the more negative content did not apply to them. Echoing the sentiment from existing scholars (Collins, 1997; Nilson, 1998), teachers also took the edge off the course policies by providing a rationale to indicate how the rules help students achieve, which is crucial to help students understand why the rules exist.

A few teachers attempted to negotiate power. Baecker (1998) suggested that teachers are often unaware of what communicates their power in the classroom. A few teachers tried to negotiate power by giving students choices on assignments, exams, and topics. Weimer (2002) asserted that, if given options, students are more likely to take them and better tailor the course to best suit their needs. Though teachers may worry students would take advantage if given too much flexibility, Singham (2005) pointed out, if a teacher trusts students, they generally will not take advantage and try to reduce the workload.

Third, observing the presentation of the syllabus revealed how teachers use classroom technology to focus students' attention. Capturing students' attention during the presentation is critical because teachers worry students do not read the syllabus (Singham, 2005). Classroom technology seemed to make the presentation more formal, similar to other class presentations. If students view the presentation of the syllabus as different from all other presentations, it is likely they will not see the syllabus or its presentation as an integral part of the course nor will they pay as much attention as they might to other presentations during the semester. Teachers' use of classroom technology directly addressed this problem, mirroring how teachers present other course materials. Additionally, the process of preparing an outline or PowerPoint adds to the effectiveness of the presentation as teachers are better organized, which may assist in establishing credibility and creating a favorable first impression of teachers during the presentation of the syllabus (Baecker, 1998; Grunert, 1997; Smith, 1993). Students may simply appreciate that the instructor is trying to incorporate technology, especially in more technologically-oriented courses.

The outlines or PowerPoints also helped minimize the information, making it easier for students to focus on the information, which became less overwhelming. I concur with Perlman and McCann (1999) that it is important for teachers to recognize students have several classes during the first week where they continually receive information about courses and teachers' policies. Students are overloaded with information the first week, making it important for teachers to develop means to minimize the information and focus students on key elements. Classroom technology can succeed in simplifying this information, making it more likely students will retain the information. Teachers seemed to make the syllabus less daunting by focusing on certain portions rather than trying to cover all the information. Classroom technology also improves teachers' delivery skills during the

presentation, allowing the teacher more freedom to be interactive and use eye contact which helps them focus students' attention.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the important findings regarding the presentation and construction of the syllabus, limitations exist. First, due to the nature of the research, it is likely that only the most outstanding teachers at the university volunteered to participate in the research. In the interviews, a few teachers mentioned that they were involved in training graduate students to teach and had led workshops on syllabi while others were participating in a peer review of teaching programs, which influenced their interest in being part of the study. These teachers may have been more reflective of their teaching than the population as a whole. While their experience made them information-rich, it is likely that not all teachers are as effective or advanced in constructing or presenting syllabi. However, it is important to note that even these highly skilled teachers still struggled with aspects of constructing and presenting syllabi. In addition, the teachers taught at the same university, so they had similar requirements regarding some of the rules and regulations they had to put in the syllabus. Other schools may have different policies on what must be included in the syllabus; thus, future research could look at multiple institutions including private, liberal arts, and community colleges.

A second limitation stems from the omission of students' perspectives from the research. Future research with students could help give a more accurate depiction about syllabi across the campus as students would be able to provide a broader perspective of how teachers present syllabi. Students can help answer important research questions, such as learning what students think teachers are trying to communicate via the syllabus and how students perceive the rules in the syllabus. In the preliminary interviews regarding these questions, students have indicated many teachers simply read the syllabus during the presentation and that they struggle to identify teachers who use the syllabus to welcome students. Additionally, quantitative research could prove fruitful in investigating the effects the strategies found in the study have on students' impressions of the teacher and course.

Third, the focus of this research was to explore the strategies teachers use in the presentation and construction of the syllabus, but on a grander scale the findings relate to what teachers do on the first day. The syllabus strategies represent a portion of teachers' larger purpose to establish the classroom environment during the first day of class. This represents a confounding factor, as the syllabus presentation is a goal of the first day of class that must integrate and subsume the larger goals of the first day. However, this research is exploratory in nature and does provide important data on the strategies teachers use pertaining to the syllabus presentation, helping to understand better how teachers accomplish their goals during the first day of class.

Given the lack of research on course syllabi, learning how teachers present these documents is a critical step in discovering the communication strategies they use. The

findings have important implications including the identification of strategies teachers use to welcome students. Balancing the tension between creating a hospitable environment while at the same time ensuring students are aware of the rigorous nature of the course is a complex problem; hopefully, the strategies teachers revealed will assist others across disciplines. Further, teachers should consider how they can incorporate classroom technology into the presentation. Syllabi are communicative documents; the findings can assist teachers in communicating and establishing the type of environment they hope to create in their classrooms via syllabi in accordance with their first day of class's goals. It is my hope this research will spur other instructional communication scholars to examine the role the syllabus plays in the instructional context and will serve as a catalyst for continued examination of the role communication has in this process.

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Received June 25, 2006

Accepted September 14, 2006

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