

1. Applicant Information

Principal Applicant

Gillian Siddall
Director, Instructional Development Centre
Associate Professor, Department of English
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Road
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1
Email: dir-idc@lakeheadu.ca
Tel: 807.343.8440
Fax: 807.343.8008

Co-Applicants (from Laurier)

Sandy Hughes, Director, Teaching Support Services*
Email: shughes@wlu.ca
Tel: 519.884.0710, ext. 4104
Fax: 519.884.6063

Deena Mandell, Associate Professor
Coordinator of the MSW Program
Faculty of Social Work*
Email: dmandell@wlu.ca
Tel: 519.884.0710, ext. 5239
Fax: 519.888.9732

Jeanette McDonald
Manager: Educational Development*
Email: jmcdonald@wlu.ca
Tel: 519.884.0710, ext. 3211
Fax: 519 884-6063

*Wilfrid Laurier University
75 University Ave. W.
Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5

2. Overview

This project brings together faculty and educational developers from Wilfrid Laurier University and Lakehead University to collaborate on investigating ways in which both faculty and students conceptualize and utilize course syllabi. The research will consist of three components:

1. An item analysis of course syllabi.
2. A content analysis of learning objectives.
3. A survey of students.

Data collected will be analysed to include the following parameters: degree status (undergraduate/graduate), program standing (first year vs. senior year), discipline, and institution (Lakehead vs. Laurier). The analysis will also consider differences that may arise from differences in gender, age, and cultural background. Project findings will be used by multiple stakeholders for a number of goals, such as informing educational programming, course/syllabus design, curriculum review and development, and accreditation. Both Laurier and Lakehead will submit a proposal for approval to their respective Ethics Review Boards.

Descriptive Title

The Course Syllabus: Learning in a Nutshell

Intended Outcomes

1. Determine how students use and experience faculty use of syllabi in their courses, accounting for differences in student gender, age, and cultural background.
2. Identify what faculty include in their syllabi and how they represent and communicate their conceptualization of learning.
3. Identify what students attend to most in syllabi and if what they attend to changes during the term.
4. Identify if and how syllabi content differs by degree status (undergraduate/graduate), program standing (first year/senior student), discipline, institution, level of faculty teaching experience, and faculty's gender.
5. Compare Laurier and Lakehead data against each other and available research/reports on syllabi.
6. Use findings to support a number of curricular and programming initiatives at the course/program/department/faculty levels.

Timeline

The project will be completed between May 2007 and April 2008 with ongoing development of materials, supports, and articles. (1) May–Aug. 2007: hire students; collect syllabi; develop/test syllabus matrix; item analysis; ethics approval; develop/test survey tool; identify courses for survey (2) Sept–Dec. 2007: content analysis; implement survey; begin data analysis; submit conference proposals (3) Jan–April 2008: complete analysis; disseminate findings; resource development.

Rationale

This project constitutes an important contribution to educational development practice.

Project findings will be used by multiple stakeholders for a number of goals (e.g., inform educational programming, course/syllabus design, curriculum review and development, and accreditation. Because the research is being done collaboratively between two universities, the relevance immediately exceeds the local, and the wide dissemination of the research results (see p. 3) will make them relevant more widely at a provincial, national, and international level.

This project will support many themes of the EDC five-year plan:

1. ***Educational development as a field of practice and scholarship.***
 - a. The project will provide a detailed analysis of the status of course syllabi at our two institutions, and investigate the ways in which they support learning in the context of the existing literature on this subject.
 - b. It will provide much needed information on how students use syllabi and what kinds of things they think would enhance their learning and increase their own agency in their learning.
2. ***Understanding academic/disciplinary cultures and practices.***

The project's focus on disciplinary difference, degree-level difference, and year-level difference

will contribute to EDC's commitment to academic/disciplinary cultures and practices. It will lead to a list of best practices for course syllabi that can be used by both our institutions and by all members of the EDC.

3. **Cross cultural issues.**

The project's attention to the different ways in which students from various cultural backgrounds conceptualize and use syllabi will contribute to the EDC's understanding of cross-cultural issues in relation to teaching and learning.

4. **Institute for new educational developers.**

The results of this project can become a useful component of the curriculum that the EDC will develop as part of its plan to initiate an institute for new faculty developers. In a sense the syllabus is a distillation of best teaching practices and of informed attentiveness to student learning.

Scholarship

Much of the published literature on this subject is faculty-focused with little or no consideration given to how students use or perceive syllabi. Three exceptions include the works of Becker and Calhoun (2000), who examined what students attend to most in syllabi; Garavalia and colleagues (1999), who explored what faculty and students perceive to be important for inclusion on a syllabus; and Smith and Razzouk (1993), who surveyed students with the goal of measuring "the nature and extent of the students' usage of the syllabi" (p. 216) and their overall recall of syllabus items at different points during the semester. A few have taken a different approach. Diann Baecker (1998) examined the language (i.e., "I", "you" and "we") of syllabi to assess what could be called the "hidden curriculum" (e.g., issues of power/authority), while Julie Leeds, an undergraduate student, revealed how syllabi are viewed by undergraduates.

Our project will add to and extend the literature on course syllabi, by assessing not only what our faculty include, but also what students attend to most during the term and how they use and experience faculty use of syllabi in their courses. Further, with our shared focus on curricular development, program review, and quality teaching and learning, we aim to examine the quality and orientation (student vs. instructor-focused) of stated learning objectives, recognizing that "students can better master their own learning when they know what the expectations are for that learning" (Parkes, Fix & Harris, 2003, p. 76). Finally, our project will explore two other elements that have not been fully addressed in the existing research: the differences between syllabi designed for undergraduate and graduate courses and differences in syllabi across disciplines.

Dissemination

1. Educational/instructional development programming, e.g., course design institute, workshops, consultations.
2. Presentations, workshops, posters at teaching and learning and discipline-specific conferences, i.e. Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Educational Developers Conference.
3. Resources prepared for workshops/websites/presentations.
4. Articles prepared for teaching and learning newsletters and journals.
5. An executive summary to department chairs who review course syllabi, faculty deans and curriculum committees.

References Cited

- Baecker, D. (1998). Uncovering the rhetoric of the syllabus. *College Teaching*, 46 (2), 58-62.
- Becker, A. & Calhoun, S. (1999). What introductory psychology students attend to on a course syllabus. *Teaching of Psychology*, 26, 6-11.
- Garavalia, L., Hummel, J., Wiley, L. & Huitt, W. (1999). Constructing the course syllabus: Faculty and student perceptions of important syllabus components. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 10 (1), 5-21.
- Leeds, J. (1993). *The Course Syllabus as Seen by the Undergraduate Student*. Paper presented at meeting of American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.
- Parkes, J., Fix, T. & Harris, M. (2003). What syllabi communicate about assessment in college classrooms. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 14 (1), 61-83).
- Smith, M. & Razzouk, N. (1993, March/April). Improving classroom communication: The case of the syllabus. *Journal of Education for Business*, 68 (4), 215-221.

3. Budget

Two Student Research Assistants (\$20.00/hour x 125 hours) Vacation and benefits included. One student per institution.	\$2,500.00
Institutional In-Kind Support: Materials, supplies, space, RA supervision.	\$700.00
Total amount requested from the EDC Grant Program	\$2,500.00