EDC 2009 Final Grant Report

Grant Applicants (* = Principle Applicant)

- Gillian Siddall*, Dean: Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Lakehead University gsiddal@lakeheadu.ca
- Jeanette McDonald, Manager: Educational Development, Wilfrid Laurier University jmcdonald@wlu.ca
- Deena Mandell, Associate Professor: Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier university dmandell@wlu.ca
- Sandy Hughes, Director: Teaching Support Services, Wilfrid Laurier University shughes@wlu.ca

Grant Title

The Course Syllabus: Learning in a Nutshell

Project Overview

This project brought together faculty members 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 study was approved by our respective ethics boards and consisted of the following three components.

1. an item analysis of course syllabi
2. a content analysis of learning objectives
3. a survey of students

The overall aims of the project included the following:

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; and**
6. **use findings to support a number of curricular and programming initiatives at the course/program/department/faculty levels.**

Study Design

The following section provides an overview of how data was collected. More detailed information including the data collection tools themselves and the associated ethics documents are available at the project wiki – http://nutshell.wikispaces.com.

The [item analysis tool](#) was developed to identify what instructors today include in their syllabi. Several studies shaped the design of the item analysis tool; testing of the tool on sample syllabi further refined the instrument. The tool itself is broken down into 13 content sections and three format/design sections with more than 100 items total. A total of 361 syllabi (214 Laurier/147 Lakehead) from the 2006/2007 academic term (face-to-face offerings only) were analyzed with the approved template. The student research assistants (RAs) completed the collection, coding, and analysis of syllabi for this phase of the research.

The student [survey](#) was developed with the goal of better understanding: (1) how students experience faculty use of course syllabi, (2) what items they perceive to be important in a course syllabus, (3) how they themselves use a course syllabus, and (4) what they attend to over the course of the term and if what they attend to most changes over time (i.e., during a semester). Survey questions were developed collaboratively by the project members via the project wiki, and guided by the results of like studies reported in the literature. The survey was broken down into seven sections and comprised of 24 questions several of which were multi-part. The survey was administered to more than 1300 students with 1320 deemed useable for study (871 Lakehead/449 Laurier). Students at Laurier and Lakehead were invited to complete the survey online via WebCT or in-class via paper and pencil. The RAs aided in question refinement, survey testing, data entry, summarizing student comments and analysis.

The [content analysis tool](#) was designed to assess alignment between the stated learning/course objectives and the specified course assessments as presented in the syllabus (i.e., listing and description). The development of the content analysis tool was perhaps the most challenging of the three data collection methods as we had to craft it in such a way that it was meaningful to each project member, given our diverse academic contexts, while at the same time being measurable and conductive of useful data. We drew on the concept of constructive alignment originally coined by John Biggs (1999) in crafting the analysis tool. The tool itself went through several iterations and piloting before a final version was developed. In total, 38 syllabi were reviewed: 16 from Lakehead and 22 from Laurier. The RAs were not involved in this phase of the project other than to select the syllabi for study.

Our multi-pronged approach allowed us to meet most of the study goals noted above. We plan on implementing a second research stage to build on the original research project to better assess outcome number two and to follow-up on questions generated by the research overall. Analysis of the data collected so far continues.

Project Findings
Analysis continues as we examine the wealth of data we collected. The project wiki provides a reporting of frequency for each data collection phase. Below we have provided some highlights of findings.

a) Item Analysis of Syllabi

More Common Items
- basic course and contact information (80-98%)
- course description (76%)
- outline of course topics (86%)

Less Commonly Items
- course objectives (69%)
- course/instructional approach (40%)
- detailed information about grading criteria (32%) |individual assessments overall (36%)

- list of course readings (94%)
- class meeting schedule (70%)
- course reading schedule (76%)
- listing of assessments (99%)
- brief description of tests and assignments (86%)
- evaluation deadlines (80%)
- weightings of tests and assignments (97%)
- course policies (e.g., late assignments 25%, course conduct, 10%, attendance 33%)
- university policies (e.g., plagiarism 52%, special needs 48%)
- academic support services (e.g., writing 3%, learning, 2%, library <1%)
- student success strategies (e.g., study suggestions 4%, additional materials such as formulas 2%)

The absence or presence of a given item on a syllabus and the degree to which it was reported left us with as many questions as answers. We were most surprised to learn that more faculty did not include objectives in their syllabus. Further instructor follow-up is needed to identify why faculty included (or not) various items, and if any items were addressed later by other means (e.g., in class). We are also interested in exploring how professors conceive the syllabus in terms of teaching and course design in general.

b) Student Survey

The students shared many interesting insights with us about how they use and experience faculty use of syllabi. Not surprisingly, students looked at assessment information (i.e., weighting, listing of assessments, description/guidelines) first when viewing a syllabus for the first time, and consistently attended to assessment information throughout the term and exam period. The course description was a close third in terms of what students looked at first; it also ranked third in terms of what influences a student to take a course (required for degree completion and course topic/fits schedule were first and second respectively). Scheduling information and learning materials were second and third respectively in terms of what students attend to most during the semester and exam period. These preliminary findings suggest that faculty need to focus their attention on providing clear and accurate assessment and scheduling information, and to situating and providing an overview of the course so that students can make informed decisions about taking a course and have an appreciation of what it is about and what's expected of them in general. We also learned that almost half (45%) of the students surveyed preferred access to both a paper and electronic copy of their syllabus, which is almost seven times greater than previously reported in the literature (see Parkes, Fix & Harris, 2003). Finally, in order of most to least in terms of application, students used the syllabus as a reference tool (88%), a time management tool (80%), a study tool (53%), and a documentation tool (32%). Refer to the project wiki for more information and findings.

c) Content Analysis of Objectives

An analysis of the objectives further reinforced that course objectives and learning outcomes require greater attention at all levels: individual, department, institutional to position their importance to teaching, learning and curricular design. Aside from a low reporting (from our perspective) on syllabi in general (< 70%), of the 38 syllabi analyzed in greater detail, only 23 had a separate section for objectives (however named), and of those 23, the type (e.g., goals, aims, objectives and outcomes) were mixed together in the same section for 18 of them. Likewise, the focus of the objectives were predominantly instructor or course oriented (71%) (i.e., what the course/instructor will do during the course) versus learner oriented (29%) (i.e., what the students will do/be able to do as a

result of taking the course). This left us to question how faculty conceive the purpose and audience of their syllabi in its design. Again, another question for future follow-up.

Dissemination of Findings
Study findings to date have been disseminated by formal and informal means, including conference presentations, publications (under review), workshops and program resources. Examples are listed below in point form.

- *The Course Syllabus: Are Faculty, Students and Educational Developers on the Same Page?* Presented at the annual conference of the Educational Developers Caucus, Durham College, February 2009.
- *Building Better Syllabi: What the Research Tells Us.* Presented at the annual conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, University of New Brunswick, June 2009.
- *Two sides of the same coin: Student-faculty perspectives of the course syllabus.* Article submitted for peer review in the CELT/STLHE publication, third edition.
- *Project Wiki – http://nutshell.wikispaces.com* – a place for information on the project design, implementation, and reporting of findings.
- Institutional workshops: *e.g., Designing Effective Syllabi: A Research Informed Approach*, November 17, 2009, Wilfrid Laurier University.
- Program Resources: e.g., *The Course Syllabus: More than Just a Contract* - http://www.wlu.ca/page.php?grp_id=333&p=8505

IV. Project Funds / Budget
EDC grant funds were spent entirely on employing two RAs – one each at Laurier and Lakehead. Additional monies provided by the academic and support departments of each project member provided supplementary funds (approx. $5,500) to hire a third student and to continue employment of one of the two original research assistants. Each institution additionally provided in-kind funding in the form of photocopying/printing of course syllabi and surveys (approx. $,1200), SPSS software (approx. $220), newspaper advertising to invite students to participate in the survey (approx. $500), shipping of materials between institutions (approx. $40), face-to-face and teleconference meetings (approx. $250), staff support (e.g., technical support for online WebCT distribution of electronic survey, graphic/marketing support for design of print advertisements, etc.) ($1,000), and general overhead expenses associated with conducting research (e.g., office space, computer hardware/software).

Table of EDC Grant Expenses

Object Code	Description	Allocated Budget	Revenue/ Expenses	Unexpended Balance
Aug 9/07	Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) Grant	2,500.00	0.00	2,500.00
Nov 15/07 to Apr 30/08	Wages & Benefits (Divine Afflu)		$1,312.88	
01-Sep-08	Wages - Sandra Ayerst		$140.00	
01-Oct-08	Wages - Sandra Ayerst		$570.00	
Invoice #2	Wages - Sandra Ayerst - November		$810.00	
	Total	**2,500.00**	**2,832.88**	**-332.88**

Note of Thanks

The project team members would like to thank the EDC for establishing the EDC Grant Program. Its establishment and the subsequent funding of this project led to the initiation of a wonderful collaboration and partnership with peers on a topic of interest to us all. We would further like to acknowledge and emphasize our appreciation of the project extension received in light of various circumstances beyond our control that extended our project timeline (e.g., faculty strike, role change, office fire, maternity leave, etc. – yes there were more!).