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Measuring the Promise: A Learning Focused Syllabus Rubric

Michael Palmer

MICHAEL PALMER IS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S TEACHING RESOURCE CENTER, AND TEACHES IN THE CHEMISTRY DEPARTMENT. HIS EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTERS ON TEACHING CONSULTATION TECHNIQUES, GRADUATE STUDENT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, COURSE DESIGN INITIATIVES, AND THE IMPACT THESE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES HAVE ON TEACHER BELIEFS AND PRACTICES. HE IS A CURRENT POD CORE COMMITTEE MEMBER (2013 16) AND HAS SERVED ON THE CORE FACULTY OF THE NEW FACULTY DEVELOPERS INSTITUTE SINCE 2009. HE CAN BE REACHED AT MPALMER@VIRGINIA.EDU.

Dorothe Bach

DOROTHE BACH IS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S TEACHING RESOURCE CENTER, AND TEACHES LITERATURE COURSES AND A SEMINAR ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER DDUCATION. HER RESEARCH INTERESTS INCLUDE DIVERSE FACULTY RETENTION AND CAREER SATISFACTION, COURSE DESIGN, LEARNING PORTFOLIOS, CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY, AND USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR LEARNING. SHE REGULARLY PRESENTS WORKSHOPS AND CONSULTS INTERNATIONALLY ON A VARIETY OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT BACH@VIRGINIA.EDU.

Adriana Streifer

ADRIANA STREIFER IS A DOCTORAL CANDIDATE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, AND A GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATE AT THE UNIVERSITY'S TEACHING RESOURCE CENTER. HER WORK AT THE CENTER INCLUDES CONDUCTING AND LEADING TEACHING WORKSHOPS FOR GRADUATE STUDENT INSTRUCTORS, AND DEVELOPING TOOLS TO MEASURE THE IMPACT OF COURSE DESIGN INITIATIVES ON TEACHER BELIEFS AND PRACTICES. SHE TEACHES COMPOSITION COURSES WITH A THEMATIC FOCUS ON CURRENT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION, AS WELL AS ENGLISH COURSES ON MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE LITERATURE, SHAKESPEARE, AND FEMINISM IN DRAMA. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT ACS6H@VIRGINIA.EDU.
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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Abstract

To enrich the resources for measuring the impact of educational development work, we have created a rubric to assess the degree to which a syllabus achieves a learning orientation. The rubric provides qualitative descriptions of components that distinguish learning focused syllabi and uses a quantitative

scoring system that places syllabi on a spectrum from content focused to learning focused. It is flexible enough to accommodate a diverse range of levels, disciplines, institutions, and learning environments, yet nuanced enough to provide summative information to developers using the tool for assessment purposes and formative feedback to instructors interested in gauging the focus of their syllabi.

Keywords: syllabus, rubric, course design, learning centered, assessment

The educational development (ED) community has called for and begun devising increasingly sophisticated approaches to evaluate programming and measure the impact of its work (Admundsen & Wilson, 2012; Chism, Holley, & Harris, 2012; Fink, 2013b; Hines, 2011; Plank & Kalish, 2010; Stefani, 2011). These rich and varied studies demonstrate efficacy of development practice, inform decision making, and help to establish the credibility of our work.

Though early ED assessment efforts focused primarily on participant perception and satisfaction surveys, many in the ED community are now relying on robust, multidimensional impact models to guide their assessment work. Models like those proposed by Kirkpatrick (1998) and Kreber and Brook (2001) look broadly for changes in instructors' perceptions, knowledge, skills, practices, and beliefs; changes in students' perceptions and their learning; and changes in institutional culture. Guided by Kreber and Brook's six component model, we have developed a series of assessment instruments to systematically investigate the arc of the educational transformation process associated with our week long course design institute (CDI). Multi day CDIs are a popular intensive workshop format for educational developers across cultural and disciplinary contexts and institutional types (Johnson, Nelms, Linder, & Palmer, 2012). Though structures vary, most CDIs are developed from research based principles of backward and integrated course design (Fink, 2013a; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), educative assessment (Huba & Freed, 2000; Wiggins, 1998), active learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), and student motivation (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2007; Svinicki, 2004).

In general, CDIs aim to help instructors create rich, active classroom environments grounded in evidence based practices; expand their pedagogical content knowledge; become reflective practitioners; and foster teaching community and personal growth.

In addition to these goals, our own week long CDI is designed to help participants create what Bain calls a "promising syllabus" (2004): a learning focused document that communicates clearly and compellingly what students will gain from the course, what they will do to achieve the promise it lays out, how they will know whether they are getting there, and how to best go about studying. We emphasize the syllabus because of its capacity to serve as a framework for designing meaningful learning environments.

The intentionality and intensity of CDIs make them powerful educational development experiences that have the potential of shifting teacher beliefs and practices away from content focused approaches toward more effective learner focused ones. But exactly to what extent do these interventions impact teaching and student learning? To answer this question about our own CDI, we have begun systematically investigating changes in instructor attitudes and beliefs, design and quality of course syllabi, classroom practices, and student learning outcomes. As such, this assessment effort contributes to the emerging body of research that goes well beyond satisfaction and perception based studies to examine whether and how changes in beliefs and attitudes translate into changes in actual teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

A key component of our assessment efforts involves analyzing instructors' pre and post CDI syllabi. To aid our work, we have developed a validated and reliable syllabus rubric. The primary objective of this rubric is to assess the degree to which a syllabus achieves a learning focused orientation. To that end, the rubric provides both qualitative descriptions of the features that contribute to a learning focused syllabus, and a scoring process that places syllabi on a spectrum from content focused to learning focused. The rubric assesses the strength of broadly applicable qualities of learning centeredness that can be found throughout a syllabus; it does not presuppose particular syllabus sections (with the exception of the course schedule), format, or any particular set of curricular or disciplinary objectives. In other words, it can accommodate nuances in form and function of different syllabi while also maintaining widespread relevance to courses in a diverse range of levels, disciplines, institutions, and learning environments.

Though initially designed to assess the impact on the course design practices of instructors who have participated in our CDI, we intend the rubric to be useful for a variety of purposes. The rubric may be adopted by those who run similar institutes and

workshops and adapted to suit the goals of the particular program and institution. We also envision the rubric as a tool to assist faculty developers who consult with individual instructors on their course design process. A developer can use the rubric to identify strengths and areas for improvement, or an instructor can use it to engage in self reflection. The tool may also be used for program level assessment, in order to determine the learning centeredness of a group of courses in a particular series, department, or curriculum. Lastly, it can complement other rubrics designed to measure the quality of course designs, such as the Quality Matters Program rubric for online courses (MarylandOnline, 2013).

It is important to note that a syllabus is only a proxy to actual classroom practices and student learning and is in itself neither a measure of teaching effectiveness nor necessarily an accurate reflection of an instructor's values. One could make a reasonable argument that a learning focused syllabus does indeed reflect an instructor's learning centered orientation and that a content focused syllabus is sometimes more reflective of institutional or departmental cultures and long standing academic traditions than of an instructor's personal values. In other words, the presence of learner centered characteristics is likely more indicative of a teacher's espoused values than is their absence.

Syllabus Rubric

Background

The development of our rubric was guided by the literature on learning focused course design (Fink, 2013a; Hansen, 2011; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Wulff & Jacobson, 2005), teaching (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Blumberg, 2008; Nilson, 2010), and student motivation (Schunk et al., 2007; Svinicki, 2004). The rubric design was also influenced by existing literature on syllabus construction and syllabus components (Baecker, 1998; Becker & Calhoon, 1999; Canada, 2013; Doolittle & Siudzinski, 2010; Eberly, Newton, & Wiggins, 2001; Garavalia, Hummel, Wiley, & Huitt, 1999; Habanek, 2005; Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Matejka & Kurke, 1994; O'Brien, Millis, & Cohen, 2008; Parkes, Fix, & Harris, 2003; Parkes & Harris, 2002; Singham, 2007; Slattery & Carlson, 2005; Smith & Razzouk, 1993). Research on syllabi has tended to describe the functions and contents of syllabi but not to provide advice about how to gauge a syllabus's degree of learning centeredness. Doolittle and Siudzinski (2010) provide a list of the twenty six most

common components of a syllabus, with variations across academic fields and levels. Though their findings reveal intriguing differences in faculty and student perspectives on syllabi (namely that faculty stress descriptive elements of a syllabus, such as the goals and main questions of the course, whereas students focus on elements relating to performance, such as grading, policies, and assignments), their work does not provide an evaluation of the effectiveness of any of the 26 syllabus components to promote learning. Habanek (2005) goes beyond listing common or popular components of syllabi. She argues that the primary purpose of syllabi is to communicate responsibilities (of both instructors and students) in a contractual form, and she selects syllabus features that would be especially important in fulfilling the goal of communication: the expression of course outcomes, schedule, materials, respect for individuals, details on how to succeed, and modeling of organization and enthusiasm. Habanek's study offers alarming results: few of the syllabi she examined actually contain the elements she describes as crucial for successful communication. Habanek's work thus motivates our own: it underscores the need for an assessment tool that helps instructors determine how well their syllabus communicates their goals and intentions and guidelines for student success.

Slattery and Carlson (2005) and Parkes and Harris (2002) perhaps come closest to the goal of combining description with practical guidance. In reviewing past research on effective syllabus design, Slattery and Carlson argue that a syllabus should meet three goals: to motivate; to provide clear structure and guidance; and to provide evidence of the contract between students and instructor, of the competence of the instructor for evaluations and job interviews, and of the institution for adhering to curricular and accreditation guidelines. They find the most effective syllabi move beyond contractual functions to invite students in warm, motivational style to engage as collaborators in the learning process. Likewise, Parkes and Harris see the most important functions of a syllabus to be permanent record, contract, and learning tool. Though they begin with the record keeping functions of the syllabus, Parkes and Harris stress six ways in which the syllabus can foster learning, from guiding students toward being self regulated learners to modelling the values of a field, a discipline, and academic integrity.

The literature on a syllabus's purposes, components, and development is echoed in our rubric. Instead of focusing on the absence or presence of certain sections of a syllabus, the rubric is applied holistically to syllabi, pulling in evidence flexibly from all sections

of the document. In other words, we purposefully designed the rubric in such a way that acknowledges the diversity of learning centered approaches to course design without losing its discriminatory function. This combination of flexibility and evaluative functionality is the rubric's most valuable contribution to the field of syllabus development and assessment.

Instrument

Our syllabus rubric (Table 1) is organized around four large scale criteria: Learning Goals and Objectives, Assessment Activities, Schedule, and Overall Learning Environment, which includes a syllabus's tone, promise, and inclusivity. These criteria do not map onto any specific section of a syllabus (with the exception of the Schedule); instead, users are directed to search for evidence of the quality of all criteria across the syllabus.

Table 1. Syllabus rubric describing main criteria, specific components, and suggestions for where to find evidence for each component. Bold text highlights key aspect(s) of each criterion

Criterion	What the component looks like…	Ideas for where to look and examples of what to look for (not all need to be present):
	Learning goals and objectives are not an "afterthought," but are a central element of the course.	
Learning Goals & Objectives	Explicitly or implicitly **stated learning goals (i.e. long range, high level goals) encompass the full range of Fink's dimensions of significant learning** (i.e., knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, learning how to learn).	• Learning goals are often found in the course description, especially affective goals. • Implicit goals may appear in other sections of the syllabus (e.g., assessment, schedule, tips for student success).
	Course level learning objectives are clearly articulated and use specific action verbs to describe in measurable terms what students will be able to do, value, or know at the end of the course. Like the	• Course level learning objectives are in a prominent and easily identifiable location (i.e., labeled section). • Learning objectives with non

	goals they are derived from, the learning objectives map onto the full range of Fink's taxonomy.	quantifiable terms, such as "understand" and "know," are avoided. For examples of strong verbs, see objective verb list (Teacher & Educational Development, University of New Mexico School of Medicine, 2005). • The syllabus considers the full range of Fink's taxonomic dimensions (including the affective ones). It is not necessary that course objectives list affective dimensions, as long as there is evidence elsewhere in the syllabus that they are being considered. • Typically, 5–8 course level objectives are appropriate. More or fewer could be problematic.
	Learning objectives are appropriately pitched to the course level, class size, position of the course within the curriculum, and characteristics of students taking the class.	• This is likely difficult to assess without knowledge of the discipline and curriculum.
	All major assessment activities positively support the learning objectives.	

Assessment Activities	It is clear that the **objectives and assessments are aligned**. In other words, the major assessment activities map onto the full range of learning objectives and the degree of mapping correlates with the weighting of the assignment.	• Though a complete mapping may not be possible without input from the instructor, connections between the objectives and major assessments should exist (i.e., each major assessment activity should map to one or more learning objectives).
	The basic features of the **major *summative* assessment activities are clearly defined**. The assessment instructions provide students with a rationale and, whenever possible, with an authentic task.	• Course level assessments are in a prominent and easily identifiable location (i.e., labeled section). Grading percentages may be included in assessment descriptions, but there should be a distinct section detailing grading (see component 8). • Major assignments are described briefly (i.e., a paragraph or two). Though complete descriptions of assessment activities may not be part of the syllabus, they should be made available at the time the assessment activity is formally introduced. • If not present, it is clear that rubrics or assessment criteria will be made available.
	There is **evidence of plans for frequent *formative* assessments with immediate feedback** from a variety of sources (e.g., self,	• Examples of formative assessments might include use of clickers, informal writing assignments, group discussions or moderated

	peer, instructor, computer generated, community). These low stakes formative assessments allow students to "practice" before high stakes summative assessments.	discussion board, and ungraded or lightly graded homework assignments. • Source of feedback may not always be evident. • While the syllabus might not describe all forms of formative assessments in detail, the syllabus makes clear that such activities will occur throughout the course. Evidence of formative assessment might depend on a fully articulated schedule.
	The **assessments are adequately paced and scaffolded** (i.e., increasing in complexity) throughout the course, and at least one is scheduled early in the semester.	• There should be evidence in the assessment descriptions or in the schedule that complex assignments build slowly over the semester or are continually re examined with the introduction of new material. • Evidence of pace and scaffolding may depend on disciplinary knowledge. • Without a fully articulated schedule, it may not be possible to fully determine the pace and degree of scaffolding.
	Grading or student evaluation information is included in the syllabus but clearly separated from information about assessment of learning (with	• The grading scheme should clearly reflect the importance of each learning objective. For example, if learning to write in the discipline is a key learning objective, writing

	the possible exception of the weight or percentage of the assessment in the overall course grade). Importantly, **the grading scheme aligns with the learning objectives and supporting assessments**.	assignments should dominate the grading scheme.
	The course schedule is a learning tool that guides students through the learning environment.	
Schedule	**Syllabus offers fully articulated and logically sequenced course schedule**, listing topics/readings /questions in chronological order along with assignment due dates. Thus structured, the schedule allows for flexibility where appropriate. A schedule is necessary in order to fully evaluate the syllabus. A missing schedule may lead to low scores on components 6 and 7.	• The schedule is not merely a list of content topics. It contains enough information (e.g., topics, context, questions, dates) to guide students through the course. It also clearly indicates when additional information will be provided at a later date.
	The learning environment is supportive and invites students to engage in and take ownership of their own learning.	
Overall Learning Environment: Promise, Tone, Inclusivity	The **tone of the document is positive, respectful, inviting**, and directly addresses the student as a competent, engaged learner.	• The positive, respectful, inviting tone is conveyed throughout the document. • Personal pronouns (e.g., you, we, us) are used, rather than "the students," "the course," or "they." • The focus of the document is on learning and possibilities and not policies and punishments. • The syllabus contains a "promise" that will be

		fulfilled through mutual effort by instructor and students if the learning goals and objectives are met. Evidence for "promise" could include the following: language that emphasizes collaborative spirit; verbs that focus on what students and instructors do, not what the course, or some other abstract entity, does; clear statement of connections between course content and paths to answering "big questions."
	The syllabus signposts a **learning environment that fosters positive motivation**, one that promotes a learning orientation rather than a performance one. The document **describes the potential value of the course in the learner's current and post course life** (cognitive, personal, social, civic, and/or professional) in a clear and dynamic way. It clearly communicates that **content is used primarily as a vehicle for learning**, to understand core principles in the discipline and promote critical thinking and other significant learning objectives.	• The course description makes clear that students will have opportunities to *wonder* and connect it in meaningful ways to things potentially important to them. The instructor encourages students to "discover" value in the course by giving them choices along the way, such as choices in project topics, reading assignments, grading schemes. • Various course components —description, objectives, schedule—frame the content through compelling, beautiful questions or big ideas. • The instructor uses information from pre course questionnaires, background

		checks, pre course exams, etc., to tailor the learning environment. In other words, he/she considers students' backgrounds in designing course activities and assignments and takes steps to reach out to students who might struggle in class. • The student is left in control of his/her learning. For example, mastery based grading mechanisms (e.g., criterion referenced, task based, and absolute grading schemes) are used rather than performance ones (e.g., grading curves and other relative or group referenced grading schemes). • The instructor also provides resources or instruction related to becoming a lifelong learner, either in general or in ways specific to the discipline. • The syllabus de emphasizes course policies by positioning them late in the syllabus or in a separate document and connecting them to clear pedagogical purposes. The syllabus frames policies in positive ways, as opposed to lists of "do nots."
	Syllabus clearly **communicates high expectations and**	• The learning objectives, assessments, activities, and

	projects confidence that students can meet them through hard work.	grading scheme all indicate a high level of academic rigor (e.g., objectives that promote high order thinking and skills development, challenging assignments, appropriate amounts of reading/writing). • The syllabus communicates that the instructor cares about students and believes each student can succeed. The syllabus communicates these beliefs by offering tips and strategies for how to meet and exceed expectations, through review sessions, appropriate office hours, additional background material, etc.
	The **syllabus is well organized and easy to navigate**. It is clear that **students will need to continually interact with the document** and the resources it provides throughout the course.	• The document is readable, meaning the organization is clear, whether it contains major section headings or not, and ordered in a way that re enforces the focus on learning. • The document clearly requires students to interact with it frequently to get reading assignments and other information.

Each criterion is further subdivided into several components. The rubric's second column contains descriptions of each component as it might look in a fully learning focused syllabus. The rubric's rightmost column indicates where to look for each component in a syllabus and examples of what to look for.

To provide a more comprehensive sense of how the rubric works, consider the criterion Learning Goals and Objectives. Three components comprise the section on Learning Goals and Objectives. First, a learning focused syllabus should convey long range and high level goals that encompass the full range of Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2013a) (see section on *Validity*). These goals may be implicit or explicit in the syllabus. Second, a syllabus should articulate course level learning objectives, or measureable outcomes that describe what students should know or be able to do at the end of the course. Finally, the learning objectives are appropriately pitched to the course level, class size, position of the course within the major or curriculum, and institutional needs. This final component, though important, goes unscored in the rubric, in recognition of the fact that the correct pitching of learning objectives would be difficult to assess without intimate knowledge of the discipline and curriculum.

Narrowing the focus to the course level learning objectives, the rubric describes what these would look like in a learning focused syllabus. The objectives should be listed prominently and articulated clearly so that students know exactly what knowledge, skills and attitudes the course expects them to develop. The objectives should avoid vague terms such as "understand" in favor of specific action verbs (Teacher & Educational Development, University of New Mexico School of Medicine, 2005) that express the precise knowledge or skills to be gained in the course. The objectives should fulfill a range of learning dimensions, even if affective ones are not explicitly stated in the list. Finally, the number of objectives is appropriate for a single course —enough to ensure learning across all six domains of Fink's Taxonomy but not too great a number to accomplish in one semester (somewhere between five to eight objectives is usually appropriate).

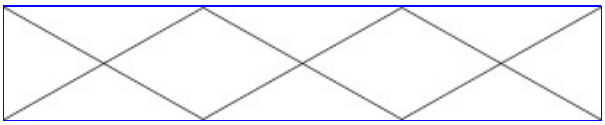
Scoring

Each of the 13 components is scored on the strength of supporting evidence. Strong evidence indicates that many (but not necessarily all) of the characteristics of the component are present in the syllabus and match the descriptions closely. Moderate evidence indicates that a few of the characteristics of the component are present in the syllabus and/or only partly match the descriptions. Low evidence indicates that very few of the characteristics of the component are present in the syllabus and/or don't match the descriptions. If a component is missing or only implicitly referenced (for example, the course schedule), this is considered low evidence.

A sample scoring sheet is shown in Table 2. “Essential” components are shown in dark gray, “important” components in light gray, and “less important” components are in white. Each essential component is awarded three points, important components two, and less important components one, regardless of the strength of evidence. In other words, a rater would place a 3 in the appropriate strength of evidence column for component #1 and a 2 in the appropriate column for component #5. After scoring all components, each column is summed and scaled by the appropriate factor: the strong evidence sub total is multiplied by 2, the moderate evidence sub total is multiplied by 1, and the low evidence sub total is multiplied by 0. This multi directional weighting scheme is used in order to ensure that the final score reflects the presence and quality of essential components. A syllabus will not score high if, for example, it does not include meaningful objectives or fails to align the objectives with the assessments. It could, however, score high if it exhibited strong evidence for most of the essential and important components but lacked evidence for the less important ones, such as regular formative feedback opportunities or organization.

Table 2. Sample scoring sheet. Components 1, 2, 4, and 9 are essential and awarded 3 points each, components 5, 10, and 11 are important and awarded 2 points each, and components 6, 7, 8, 12, and 13 are less important and awarded 1 point each in the column describing the strength of evidence. Component 3 is not scored but included for completeness. Each column is summed and weighted according to the strength of the evidence

Criterion	**Component**	**Strength of Evidence**		
		Strong	**Moderate**	**Low**
Learning Goals & Objectives	Learning goals encompass full range of Fink’s dimensions of significant learning		3	
	Course level learning objectives are clearly articulated and use specific action verbs	3		

	Learning objectives are appropriately pitched	 [/t/tia/images/17063888.0033.103-00000001.jpg]		
Assessment Activities	Objectives and assessments are aligned		3	
	Major summative assessment activities are clearly defined		2	
	Plans for frequent formative assessment with immediate feedback	1		
	Assessments are adequately paced and scaffolded	1		
	Grading information is included but separate from assessment; it is aligned with objectives		1	
Schedule	Course schedule is fully articulated and logically sequenced			3
Classroom Environment	Tone is positive, respectful, inviting		2	

	Fosters positive motivation, describes value of course, promotes content as a vehicle for learning		2	
	Communicates high expectations, projects confidence of success		1	
	Syllabus is well organized, easy to navigate, requires interaction	1		
	subtotals	6×2 = 12	14×1 = 14	3×0 = 0
			TOTAL	26/46

The maximum score possible is 46; content focused syllabi might fall in the range 0–16, transitional, 17–30, and learning focused, 31–46. The sample scoring sheet illustrates a syllabus that falls in the transitional range. If used formatively, the instructor of this particular syllabus would quickly see that by developing more meaningful learning objectives, improving alignment, and articulating a schedule, he or she could move the syllabus toward the learning focused end of the continuum.

Supplementary Rubric

Keeping true to the backward course design model, we have also developed a supplemental rubric to assess the quality of learning activities (Table 3). Because day to day classroom activities are often not evident in syllabi, we have chosen to parse this criterion out of the main rubric and leave it to the discretion of the rater—whether faculty developer or instructor—to decide if and when to apply these components.

Table 3. Supplemental syllabus rubric describing learning activities, specific components, and suggestions for where to find evidence for each component. Component 14 is essential and awarded 3 points, component 15 is important and awarded 2 points, and component 16 is less important and awarded 1 point when rating evidence. Bold text highlights key aspect(s) of each criterion

Criterion	What the component looks like…	Ideas for where to look and examples of what to look for (not all need to be present):
	The "classroom" is a dynamic place and takes advantage of evidence based practices.	
Learning Activities	It is clear that **classroom activities, assessments, and learning objectives are aligned**. In other words, the classroom learning activities directly support the assessments and help prepare students for them.	• Not all classroom activities may be evident in the syllabus but there is some indication of the day to day structure of the learning environments. Red flags might include: exclusive use of a traditional lecture format when critical thinking is an objective; little reflective writing when self discovery is an objective; canned homework assignments or multiple choice tests when problem solving is an objective.
	The **learning activities are derived from evidence based practices**.	• The instructor relies on pedagogical strategies and classroom activities that have some basis in the literature to support their efficacy.
	The **learning activities are likely to actively engage students** in a variety of ways.	• Students have opportunities, for example, to discuss course material, work individually and in groups, teach each other, solve problems, debate concepts, simulate scenarios, and/or reflect—individually and collectively—about the meaning of their learning experiences. Individual class periods involve multiple modes of instruction and varied activities.

Component #14 is designated essential, #15 important, and #16 less important; each is scored similarly to the scheme used for the main rubric. When the supplementary rubric is applied, the maximum total score possible is 58. In this scenario, content focused syllabi might fall in the range 0–18, transitional, 19–40, and learning focused,

41–58.

Validity

To accurately score syllabi, the rubric assumes raters have three pieces of prior knowledge: 1) fluency with Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (2013a), 2) clarity on our definitions of learning goals and objectives, and 3) familiarity with alignment as a course design construct.

Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning

Our rubric is based on Fink's notion that for significant learning to occur learners need to be engaged on multiple dimensions, including the cognitive, affective, and self directed learning domains (2013). Repackaging and expanding on Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson et al., 2001; Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning identifies "six kinds of significant learning" (Foundational Knowledge, Application, Integration, Human Dimension, Caring, and Learning How to Learn) and organizes them in a nonhierarchical fashion. Each of these six broad categories encompasses many types of modes of thought, skills, and intellectual and affective processes that reinforce each other and contribute to learning. Syllabi that score highly on our rubric attend to all six kinds of significant learning in Fink's taxonomy.

Definitions of Learning Goals and Objectives

Accurate scoring also depends on understanding the distinction we make between learning "goals" and "objectives." Though in common parlance, goals and objectives may be used interchangeably as synonyms for desired outcomes, in course design settings it is useful to distinguish between a course's longer ranging, but perhaps less tangible goals and the shorter term, measureable objectives of a course.

Learning goals are high level and long term. Educational developers can provoke instructors to envision goals for their students by asking them what they hope students will remember or be able to do three or more years after taking the course (Fink, 2013a). Setting goals gives instructors the opportunity to think about how their courses contribute to students' learning as a whole, whether that be developing skills that will be used in subsequent courses or careers, introducing or honing discipline specific modes of thinking, or inspiring student interest in a field that is new to them. Because they are long ranging and more holistic in nature, goals are frequently articulated in

aspirational and inspirational language in course descriptions or sections that communicate the course's long term value for the learner.

By contrast, a syllabus's objectives (also sometimes referred to as intended learning outcomes) are always concrete and measurable. They translate high level goals into measurable course level outcomes in such a way that students understand what the course intends for them to achieve. Students practice course objectives through a variety of formative, scaffolded learning activities. Course assessments then measure student mastery of those objectives.

Alignment

The last of our assumptions is that rubric users are familiar with alignment as a conceptual tool in the course development process. In a well aligned course, assessments and learning activities are directly derived from learning goals and objectives (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Fink, 2013a; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Wulff & Jacobson 2005). Following the process of backward design, instructors begin by articulating objectives for student learning and then create assessments and learning activities (for both in and out of class time) that support the development of specific skills, attitudes, knowledge and values articulated in the objectives. Another way to think of alignment is for instructors to ask themselves if their in class activities and homework assignments allow students to practice the knowledge and skills they value and if their assessments actually measure mastery of those skills.

Alignment is absolutely necessary in any learning focused syllabus, but it is insufficient on its own to create a learning focused document. For example, a math instructor who wishes students to memorize formulae could design a perfectly aligned course if the assessments measured memorization with multiple choice exams. The course would be aligned, but it wouldn't score well according to our rubric because it fails to address multiple dimensions of significant learning across a wide range of learning objectives. The importance of designing assessments and learning activities with an eye toward alignment, and the insufficiency of alignment as a principle on its own, explains why alignment features prominently in several components of the syllabus assessment rubric but does not count as its own criterion.

It is worth noting that even with a lack of fluency in Fink's taxonomy or a lack of understanding of the distinction between goals and objectives or the nuances of

alignment, we have found that scoring tends to be quite consistent, across all components and among multiple raters, for syllabi that fall on the content end of the spectrum. But this is not true of learning focused syllabi, where scores vary wildly when raters do not have a clear understanding of our underlying conception of learner centeredness.

Inter rater Reliability

Our goal was to produce a rubric capable of consistently achieving a 5 point spread or less in the final score (approximately 10% of the maximum possible points) across multiple raters and to have no more than a one level variation in evidence for each component. To achieve this, we put the rubric through three main revision cycles. In each case, we analyzed content and learning focused syllabi from a range of disciplines and academic levels.

The first round of scoring was conducted internally by two members of the research team who helped to develop the rubric. We analyzed six pre and post CDI syllabi by comparing overall and component level scores. Where component scores differed, especially those for essential and important components, we discussed our rationales for the score and revised the rubric to more accurately define the criteria.

The second revision cycle involved seven raters: three members of the research team and four additional raters (three UVA graduate students and one post doc) who had no familiarity with the rubric. Each person scored two pairs of pre /post CDI syllabi. As a group, we discussed inconsistences in scoring and revised the rubric as appropriate, again focusing on essential and important components.

In the final revision cycle, we asked thirty two workshop participants at the 2013 POD Network conference to each score one of four syllabi (Palmer, Bach, & Streifer, 2013). Five of the UVA affiliated raters who had scored during the second revision cycle scored all four of these syllabi as well as three other pairs of pre /post CDI syllabi. By performing an item analysis on each component, we were able to identify, for example, components that showed perfect agreement among all scorers; components that had only one or two outlier among all scorers, where the outlier was in the adjacent category; and components with other variation patterns.

For each component lacking consensus agreement, we interviewed the UVA affiliated

raters to better understand their viewpoints. For example, some raters were assigning strong evidence to syllabi that mentioned having a schedule even if it wasn't present in the syllabus; others rated this as low evidence, consistent with our intention. Using information gleaned from these interviews, we revised the rubric one last time.

Summary

The rubric discussed here was developed to assess the effectiveness of our CDI in helping participants design learner centered syllabi. It has undergone multiple revisions to the point where we are confident that it is reliable and valid so long as raters are familiar with Fink's taxonomy, our definition of goals and objectives, and the principles of constructive alignment. The rubric provides both qualitative descriptions of 15 components that identify a syllabus as having a learning focused orientation and a quantitative scoring process that places syllabi on a spectrum from content focused to learning focused. It is flexible enough to accommodate a diverse range of course levels, disciplines, institutions, and learning environments, yet nuanced enough to provide accurate summative information to developers using the tool for assessment purposes and formative feedback to instructors who want gauge the focus of their syllabi. To help others use the rubric effectively, we have created a "living" User Guide that provides relevant background information, details about validity and scoring, the rubric and blank scoring sheet, references, and sample syllabi which have been scored and annotated (Palmer, Bach, & Streifer, 2014).

In the process of developing the rubric, we analyzed nearly 20 different syllabi, and whenever possible compared pre and post CDI versions of redesigned courses. Our preliminary results indicated that all instructors move toward the learning focused end of the scale after participating in our CDI. Instructors who initially had highly content focused syllabi and scored below 15 on our rubric gained as many as 20–30 points following CDI. Instructors who began with more learning focused syllabi also improved but exhibited smaller gains (5–10 points). We are currently analyzing all pre and post CDI syllabi collected from the past eight years (approximately 400 syllabi). This will help us better understand factors that influence movement or absence of movement on our scale.

We are also beginning to collaborate with other institutions interested in using this rubric to assess their faculty development initiatives. Together, we are planning multi

institutional research projects to explore the effectiveness of different CDI formats in helping instructors move to more learning centered approaches to teaching.

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