Syllabus Construction for Math TAs

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Based on "The Purposes of a Syllabus" by J. Parkes and M.B. Harris

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Introduction

Definition

syl·la·bus [sil-uh-buhs] noun, plural -bus·es, -bi [-bayh]

1. (1656) a table of contents
2. an outline or other brief statement of the main points of a discourse, the subjects of a course of lectures, the contents of a cirriculum, etc.

1. The syllabus as a contract
2. The syllabus as a permanent record
3. The syllabus as a learning tool

The syllabus as a contract

"...the syllabus should delineate the responsiblities of students and of the instructor for various tasks."

Why?

- makes expectations clear to the students
- covers **you** in the event of a grievance
- prevents feelings of unfairness
- prevents you from accidentally being capricious

Examples

- How should students contact you?
  How will you reply?

- What do you expect from attendance?
  When will you show up?

- How should students challenge their grades?
  To what extent **can** you change their grades?

- What should students do if they show up late to class?
  This is probably not up to you; ask your instructor.

Specific contractual content

Timeline

- Course calendar, if it is available. *Your instructor might not have one: don't make it up!*

- What should students do before coming to your class? *Review lecture notes? Attempt the HW? Get questions ready about the quiz?*

- If some meetings occur outside of regular meeting times, indicate it. *Practice exams in Merit, extra review sessions for exams*

Specific contractual content, cont.

Policies

"...any behaviour or policies that could affect a student's grade"

- Example: Your instructor wants all grade requests to go to the TA who graded that problem. What should **your** students do?
- Example: Your instructor doesn't allow make-up quizzes, but will drop the lowest quiz score. What do you want **your** students to do if they miss a day? A quiz day?
- How much can your students work together during your recitation section? On homework? Be **consistent** with your instructor's policies!
- What is appropriate class behaviour?

Specific contractual content, cont.

Student code: `http://admin.illinois.edu/policy/code/`

Emergency Dean:
`http://www.odos.uiuc.edu/deanonduty/index.asp`

DRES: `http://www.disability.illinois.edu/`

Academic calendar: `http://illinois.edu/calendar/list/557`

What is the drop date? What should your student do if they are thinking of dropping? A TA should never **tell** students to drop!

The syllabus as a permanent record

Accountability and Documentation

This is mostly important for the instructor and the department. Some things you should be sure to include:

- Title and dates of the course
- Name of the department
- Your name, title, and contact information
- Credit hours ("required for Math 200" "1.00 credit hours for Math 199")
- prerequisites, corequisites
- required and optional texts

The syllabus as a learning tool

This purpose is less well known.

What is your teaching philosophy?
"Sometimes informing students about the instructor's philosophical beliefs can be useful."
Adjust their expectations.

Students need to learn many skills in order to succeed in college:

- Time management
- Prioritization
- Technology
- etc....

Your syllabus can help.

A learning-centered syllabus

Planning for the tasks your course requires:

Examples

- Should students expect to finish your worksheets in class?
- Will students be better prepared for your recitation if they read the text or if they attempt the homework?
- When should the students ask questions about the quizzes? about the homework?

A learning-centered syllabus, cont.

Monitoring their performance in your course:

Examples

- Can students check their grades somewhere?
- Does the instructor have information about how much quizzes, homework, and exams are worth?
- Can you compute their current grades for students?
- Can you give students feedback in office hours?
- Is it worse to miss a homework assignment or to miss a quiz?
- Maybe it is impossible for you to know how well students are doing, and they should go talk to the instructor.

A learning-centered syllabus, cont.

"[G]ive guidance...about the learning to be done."

Examples

- How much time should they spend on classwork outside of your recitation?
- Should they go to lectures?
- Should they go to your office hours? often? always?
- Should they go to the instructor's office hours?
- Should they check your website often?
- Do they need their textbook to do homework?
- How long is the homework?
- How long should they expect to study for an exam?
- What are some common mistakes or pitfalls?
- Suggest strategies for your class.

A learning-centered syllabus, cont.

Help students identify whether or not they are prepared.
Avoid making binding statements if you are not the instructor.
Remember that TAs should never tell a student to drop a class.

Examples

- Where can students get tutoring?
- What do you hope they already know before starting this class?
- How available are you to give extra help?
- Do you recommend any web-based tools?

Put the course content into context. Math 115 will prepare you for Math 221 by... or Math 181 will make you a better voter... or This course will make you a better investor...

A learning-centered syllabus, cont.

Your syllabus should serve as a model of professional thinking and writing!
If your syllabus is confusing and difficult to read... why should their homework be clear?

"Messy or incmplete homework will **never be accepted!!**"
...not the best thing to put into your syllabus.

General guidelines

Make your syllabus easy to use!

You want them to read it, right? Make it easy for them to find answers to their questions without bothering you. Organize it well and use clear language.

Minimum required information

Every semester, the department will put a form in your mailbox indicating the minimum information that must appear in your syllabus.

Prevent past problems!

If something has been a problem before, try to prevent it with your next sylalbus.