Constructing a Learner-Centered Syllabus: One Professor's Journey

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Abstract

Educators increasingly agree that a learner-centered syllabus is associated with better rapport between students and teachers and increased student motivation, achievement, and empowerment. Accordingly, in 2009 Cullen and Harris developed a rubric for assessing the degree to which a syllabus is learner-centered versus teacher-centered. To date, however, there has been no such resource to explain how to actually construct a learner-centered syllabus. Therefore, I set out to provide a primer: In the first half of this paper, I review the history of syllabus construction and then discuss the research that assesses the impact of learner-centered syllabi. In the second half, I provide an assessment tool for teachers, based on the work of Cullen and Harris, for evaluating a syllabus to determine its learner-centeredness. I then explain specific elements of a learner-centered syllabus and provide examples of how to include these elements in your syllabus.

It is the first day of class, and what are you discussing? Yes, the syllabus! You do what you have always done: review certain elements of the syllabus (e.g., grading policies, due dates, assignments, and assessments)—all the important things that you want your students to know. When you are finished, you might even have a little time left to start teaching course content. After class, you reflect on how the first day went, and a few questions surface. You might ask yourself, *What is the purpose of my syllabus? My students seemed very disengaged today. Why? Now that I think of it, the syllabus doesn't match who I am as a teacher. Why not?* Ultimately, you conclude that something must change and that you need to investigate how to improve your syllabus.

The good news is that there is an increasing amount of available research on best practices in syllabi construction (e.g., Altman & Cashin, 1992; Cullen & Harris, 2009; Grunert, 2000; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). However, more important, a growing body of research and practice suggests that learner-centered syllabi can have several positive impacts on students (e.g., DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015; Richmond et al., 2014; Richmond, Slattery, Morgan, Mitchell, & Becknell, 2016b; Richmond, Morgan, Slattery, & Venzke, 2013; Saville, Zinn, Brown, & Marchuk, 2010). Moreover, Cullen and Harris best define a learner-centered syllabus as "an attempt to create community, a sharing of power and control over what is learned and how it is learned as well as a focus on assessment and evaluation tied directly to learning outcomes" (p. 117).

However, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Prior to discussing the construction of a learner-centered syllabus, it is important to understand the main purpose of a syllabus as traditionally researched and practiced and the benefits of a learner-centered one.

The Purpose of a Syllabus: A Historical Review

The syllabus can take many different forms and serve many different purposes (Altman & Cashin, 1992; Slattery & Carlson, n.d., 2005). First, and in some cases foremost, the syllabus is viewed as a contract (Elberly, Newton, & Wiggins, 2001; Habanek, 2005; Richmond, Boysen, & Gurung, 2016a). Robinson, Wolf, Czekanski, and Dillon (2014) suggest that the syllabus defines and establishes the respective duties, roles, and responsibilities of the students and the teacher. Contractual syllabus elements may include a description of and rules regarding plagiarism and academic dishonesty; a calendar of course events; and policies on grading, exams, revising and redoing assignments, turning in late work, and implementing elements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (Parkes & Harris, 2002; Slattery & Carlson, 2005).

Second, the syllabus is also considered a permanent record that contains detailed and accurate information about the course requirements and content (Parkes & Harris, 2002). Examples include the course-catalog description and accurate summaries of student learning objectives (SLOs); evaluation procedures; course content; and required readings, textbooks, and other materials (Richmond, et al., 2016a).

Third, the syllabus can serve as a cognitive map and learning tool for students (Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Parkes & Harris, 2002). That is, the syllabus allows teachers to provide students with a visual layout of the course and, ideally, an explanation of how to succeed. Such a syllabus is student- or learner-centered, in that it includes detailed success tips; common misconceptions and pitfalls students encounter and how to avoid them; a list of campus resources (e.g., writing, disability, counseling, and student success centers); as well as an embedded explanation of course assignments, assessments, and activities (Cullen & Harris, 2009; Parkes & Harris, 2002, Slattery & Carlson, n.d., 2005).

Why Construct a Learner-Centered Syllabus?

As alluded to previously, there is mounting evidence that learner-centered syllabi can have positive effects on both students and teachers (e.g., DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015; Richmond et al., 2013, 2014, 2016b; Saville et al., 2010). First, research suggests that when teachers construct learner-centered syllabi, students are empowered and behave better in class (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). A learner-centered syllabus may cause students to perceive the teacher as possessing more exemplary teaching characteristics (e.g., approachability, flexibility) and greater rapport with them. Moreover, students remember more details from a learner-centered syllabus (Richmond et al., 2014; Saville et al., 2010).

In a true experimental design with random assignment, Richmond and colleagues (2016b) asked students to read hypothetical course syllabi that were independently rated as learner-centered or teacher-centered, using Cullen and Harris's (2009) rubric for evaluating learner-centeredness. Students then rated the instructor associated with each syllabus on student-professor rapport (Wilson & Ryan, 2013) and the master teaching behaviors outlined by Keeley, Furr, and Buskist (2009). Richmond et al. (2016b) found that students who read a learner-centered syllabus perceived its teacher as possessing more rapport with students (e.g., in terms of student engagement and perceptions) and as exhibiting higher levels of the master-teacher behavioral qualities of "approachable/personable," "creative/interesting," "encouraging/caring," "enthusiastic," "flexible/open-minded," and "happy/positive." Additionally, students who received a learner-centered syllabus recalled more elements of the syllabus than students who received a teacher-centered syllabus.

In a similar study, Saville and colleagues (2010) found that students who received a very detailed syllabus (including learner-centered elements) perceived the instructor as possessing significantly higher levels of master-teacher behaviors (e.g., approachable, creative, caring, enthusiastic) compared to an instructor who wrote a brief syllabus for the same course. Therefore, it appears that constructing a learner-centered syllabus can positively affect your students' perceptions of your teaching behaviors and the rapport you have with them.

Second, constructing a learner-centered syllabus with a positive tone and discussing it on the first day of class may affect how students perceive the instructor (Harnish & Bridges, 2011). In a cleverly designed experiment, Harnish and Bridges randomly assigned students to read syllabi that were designed with either a cold or a warm tone. (See Table 1 for examples of warm and cold syllabus tones.) Students then rated the instructor who "wrote" the syllabus on scales of

Table 1 • Examples of Friendly and Warm Syllabus Elements

Syllabus Element	Warm and Friendly Language
Learning resources for students	Each class is different. Sometimes we need a little help from one another to learn how to study for a test or complete an assignment. If you need help, please do not hesitate to come and talk to me
Office hours	Student Hours Plaza 220 AB MF 9:00–10:00 a.m. TR 10:30–11:30 a.m. arichmo3@msudenver.edu If these hours do not work with your schedule, please let me know and I will try to work out a time to meet you. Or, if my door is open, just stop on by, I would love to see you.
Teaching Philosophy	I truly believe in your success as a student and adapting my instruction to ensure your success. Below you will find several different instructional methods to help me accomplish my goal: 1. I vary my teaching methods to ensure that our courses are accessible to all students . . . 2. I believe in transparency, meaning I have nothing to hide from you and you have nothing to hide from me . . . 3. Everyone has the right and ability to be successful in this course . . . 4. In my courses I promote a safe climate where we examine content from multiple cultural perspectives . . . 5. Foremost, I believe in student-centered active learning . . .

Note. Content in this table is modeled on Harnish and Bridges (2011).

approachability, warmth, coldness, motivation, and difficulty. Harnish and Bridges found that students perceived the instructor who wrote the warm syllabus as significantly more motivated, warm, and approachable, as well as a less difficult teacher.

Third, asking students to generate elements of the syllabus, such as classroom behavior rules, on the first day of class versus the instructor providing such behavior rules is associated with higher student ratings (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). In the self-generated classroom-behavior class, students were divided into small groups, which were each assigned a behavioral category (e.g., eating in class) and instructed to develop a rule for it. The class then voted on each of the rules generated and discussed strategies for implementation and enforcement. Finally, each student wrote the classroom rules and strategies on his or her syllabus. DiClementi and Handelsman found that the class in which the instructor generated the classroom rules experienced higher frequencies of negative student behaviors. Students who wrote their own classroom-behavior rules rated the instructor more favorably; however, there was no difference between the two groups in perceived fairness and importance of the classroom rules or in course grades.

Finally, syllabi that have been peer-reviewed by syllabi experts and published (e.g., Project Syllabus of the Society of Teaching of Psychology) tend to be more learner-centered than teacher-centered. Richmond et al. (2013, 2014) studied peer-reviewed exemplary psychology syllabi and found they were predominantly learner-centered regarding learning rationale, collaboration, the student's role, outside resources, syllabus tone and focus, grading, feedback mechanisms, and learning outcomes. However, they also found that the syllabi tended to be teacher-centered when it came to the teacher's role and accessibility, evaluation, and revising and redoing.

As demonstrated by several studies (e.g., DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015; Richmond et al., 2016b; Saville et al., 2010), when you redesign your course syllabi with a learner-centered focus you can increase many desirable student learning outcomes and improve perceptions of both the teacher and course. Now the question becomes, *How do I construct a learner-centered syllabus?*

How to Construct a Learner-Centered Syllabus

In this section, I describe how I changed my teacher-centered syllabus to a learner-centered one. The changes I made were based on Cullen and Harris's (2009) excellent rubric for evaluating the degree to which your syllabus follows the tenets of learner-centered instruction. I began with a syllabus for one of my most frequently taught courses and evaluated it using this rubric (summarized in Table 2). I then changed the syllabus according to suggestions from Cullen and Harris and other prominent researchers in the field, and reevaluated it using the same rubric.

Cullen and Harris (2009) describe several key qualities of a learner-centered syllabus. These include the major factors that establish community (e.g., accessibility of the teacher, the role of collaboration, and a learning rationale), those that define the balance of power and control between student and teacher (e.g., the teacher's role, the student's role, outside resources, and syllabus focus), and those of evaluation and assessment (e.g., grades, feedback mechanisms, evaluation, desired learning outcomes, and revision/redoing). The rubric lists 15 of these elements, each rated on a scale of 1 (*more teacher-centered*) to 4 (*more learner-centered*). The 15 elements are divided among the sub-factors of community, power and control, and evaluation/assessment. For example, Cullen and Harris (p. 123) state that the community sub-factor of *accessibility of teacher* would be as follows:

> 1 = *Available for prescribed number of office hours only*; 2 = *Available for prescribed number of office hours; provides phone and email*; 3 = *Multiple means of access; and encourages interaction*; 4 = *Multiple means of access; and requires interactions*.

For a complete list of all of the questions and the scoring rubric, refer to Cullen and Harris.

To start the process, I first evaluated a syllabus that I had been using for years (and that I considered a good syllabus that *was* learner-centered), using Cullen and Harris's (2009) rubric. Likewise, your first step would be to choose a syllabus and evaluate it, using the modified version of Cullen and Harris's rubric in Table 2 or Cullen and Harris's original rubric to evaluate your syllabus.

What areas scored lower than expected? What is your plan for making your syllabus more learner-centered? In what follows, I discuss examples and ways for you to make your syllabus more learner-centered, based on my own experience.

Community in a Syllabus, Really?

So, what does it mean to have community in your syllabus and, as a function of the syllabus, community in your course? Cullen and Harris (2009) suggest that your syllabus should express your desire to create a community of learners within your classroom. They also observe that you can establish community through specific syllabus elements; namely, accessibility of the teacher, learning rationale, and required collaboration.

Accessibility of the teacher. If you were to survey your students and ask them, "How accessible do you think I am?" what would their response be? Very accessible? Not accessible at all? Somewhat accessible? In other words, how can your students contact you? On one side of the spectrum (teacher-centered), if you list only your office hours and office phone number, students may find you unapproachable or inaccessible. It was not surprising that when I first rated my syllabus on this element, I quickly discovered that it tended to be more teacher-centered because of my limited

access outside of class (as illustrated in Figure 1a). If you are interested in incorporating learner-centered elements into your syllabus, you need to do more. You should list not only your office hours and office phone number but—dare I say it?—your cell/mobile phone number. If providing your cell number creates some privacy problems, you may want to use an anonymous texting service such as Celly. This will allow you to text your students anonymously with various course announcements and other communications without knowing their cell numbers or they knowing yours. Alternatively, or in addition, you should highly encourage your students to visit with you at your office or even require them to stop by during your office hours (as illustrated in Figure 1b).

Learning rationale. Do you provide a detailed rationale for each type of assignment and assessment tied to learning outcomes? If you are like me and listed only the details of the assignment or assessment (i.e., what to do and when) but did not provide a reason for your requirements, your syllabus may tend to be more teacher-centered (Cullen & Harris, 2009). For instance, why do you give exams? Perhaps your syllabus describes what your exams are like (e.g., types of questions, whether or not they are comprehensive), but does it explain why you believe they are important for student learning? To illustrate, in my developmental research methods course (an upper-division psychology course), I have a journal article evaluation assignment. From a more teacher-centered perspective, I might describe the assignment as follows:

> *Journal Article Evaluation:* You will be required to read three separate articles that demonstrate different research designs discussed in class. You will then be asked to answer several questions that pertain to one of the three articles.

Table 2 • A Self-Assessment of How Learner-Centered Your Syllabus Is

Directions: Please fill out the self-evaluation below based on how often you provide this information in your syllabus. *Scale*: 4 = Always, 3 = Often, 2 = Rarely, 1 = Never	Your Score
Community	
1. You are available for multiple office hours, and by multiple means of access, including phone(s), e-mail, fax.	
2. You hold open hours in locations other than office (e.g., library or student union).	
3. You provide rationales for assignments, activities, methods, policies, and procedures that are tied to learning outcomes.	
4. Collaboration is required through group work in class, team projects, or encouraging your students to learn from one another in other ways.	
Power and Control	
5. You encourage students to participate in developing policies and procedures for class and to provide input on grading, due dates, and assignments.	
6. Students are expected to provide outside resource information for class.	
7. You require that students take responsibility by bringing additional knowledge to class via class discussion or presentation.	
8. Your syllabus is weighted toward student learning outcomes and means of assessment.	
Evaluation and Assessment	
9. Your grades are tied to learning outcomes.	
10. You provide opportunities to achieve extra points.	
11. Not all work done in the course is graded.	
12. Your syllabus provides clear and complete information about course grading/assessment.	
13. You employ periodic feedback mechanisms to monitor learning (e.g., graded and nongraded quizzes, tests, lecture-response systems, tests, reflection papers).	
14. You have both summative and formative evaluations (e.g., oral presentations, group work, self-evaluation, peer evaluation).	
15. You allow students to revise and redo their assignments.	

Note. This self-assessment is modified and adapted from Cullen and Harris (2009, pp. 123–125).

Figure 1 • Community: Teacher-Centered vs. Learner-Centered Syllabus Example

(a)	(b)
Instructor: Dr. Aaron S. Richmond **Office Hours:** Monday & Wednesday 9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. by appointment only **Office Location:** Plaza Building 220-AB **E-mail:** arichmo3@msudenver.edu	**Instructor:** Dr. Aaron S. Richmond **Office Hours:** Monday & Wednesday 9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. walk-in **OR JUST COME ON BY**. If I am here, my door is always open. Also, remember there are participation points for coming by ☺ **Office Location:** Plaza Building 220-AB **E-mail:** arichmo3@msudenver.edu **Phone:** 303-556-3085 **Text via CELLY:** 4573 @PSY4550 **Twitter:** @AaronSRichmond

Note: Syllabus element "a" is an example of teacher-centered accessibility, and "b" is an example of learner-centered accessibility.

However, from a more learner-centered perspective, I would describe *and* explain the assignment like this:

> *Journal Article Evaluation (tied to SLOs 1 and 2)*: This assignment is designed to assess your skills as a critical reader and to apply the concepts taught in class to published research. Becoming a critical reader will help you in your future career by enabling you to be accurate in your assumptions and predictions. You will be required to read three separate articles that demonstrate different research designs discussed in class. You will then be asked to answer several questions that pertain to one of the three articles.

Notice that in the learner-centered example I explain the intent of the assignment and tie it to specific SLOs that are also listed in the syllabus.

Collaboration. Incorporating collaborative learning into your class can increase student learning (e.g., class academic performance), student engagement, class attendance, and conceptual understanding (Armbruster, Patel, Johnson, & Weiss, 2009; Deslauriers, Schelew, & Wieman, 2011; Freeman et al., 2007; Haak, HilleRisLambers, Pitre, & Freeman, 2011; Preszler, 2009; Saville, Zinn, Neef, Van Norman, & Ferreri, 2006). When creating a learner-centered syllabus, it is very important to not only encourage but also require collaboration in your course. Although not all courses are amenable to substantial amounts of collaboration, most can incorporate it to some degree, in ways that are often overlooked.

According to Cullen and Harris (2009), if you prohibit collaboration (and your syllabus reflects this), your syllabus is considered teacher-centered regarding this element. However, if you highly encourage or require collaboration and use collaborative techniques in your class (as described in your syllabus), this element of your syllabus is considered highly learner-centered. You can foster collaboration through course assignments that require it during and outside of class time. For example, in my developmental research methods course, I describe the following research project, which must be completed as a team task:

> *Team Research Project (SLOs 4, 5, and 6)*: To help you become good scientists and proper consumers of research, this project will give you firsthand experience in designing and carrying out a research project in developmental psychology. You and your group will collaboratively develop a research topic, review relevant literature, develop methodology to investigate the topic, collect and analyze data, and present your findings to the class and in a final paper.

If this type of assignment is not possible, explain (in your syllabus) that you will grade students on their participation in cooperative learning activities during class instruction (see Macpherson, n.d., for a resource and compendium of cooperative learning activities).

Perhaps you are already doing much to create community in your course. However, are your efforts conveyed in your syllabus? That is, can your students see, by reading the syllabus, your commitment to fostering a community of learners? If not, it is important, as Cullen and Harris (2009) suggest, to express and define how accessible you are to them and by what means, to discuss why they are doing specific assignments and assessments (not just their requirements), and to emphasize how strongly you encourage and require collaboration in your class.

Power and Control: It Is *So* Difficult to Relinquish, but Necessary

Relinquishing control may arguably be the most difficult change you will make in your syllabus. I know it remains so for me. Relinquish power and control? Impossible! Cullen and Harris (2009) discuss the importance of sharing power within the class and the syllabus. Specifically, they state that "a syllabus can reveal attempts by the professor to create an environment where control is shared." (p. 118). They suggest

that you shift this power and control through your thorough description of the teacher's role, the student's role, how you assign outside resources, and through the tone and focus of the syllabus.

Teacher's role. Stop and think: What is your role as a teacher? Do you have a clear answer? Are you a guide? Are you the sage on the stage? Are you the authority figure? Are you the herder of cats?! Regardless of how you see yourself and your role, the most important question is, *Do you convey this role in your syllabus?* Personally, when coming into this process, I had a very strong sense of who I was, what my role was, and what type of teacher I wanted to be. Ironically, after reading my syllabus, my students had no clue what my role was, except that of the "maker of policies."

According to Cullen and Harris (2009), the teacher's role should be one of shared power. By sharing power, students gain a sense of autonomy, self-motivation, and self-regulation, and they may become more invested in the course. To share power in your syllabus and course, you should encourage your students (on the first day of class) to assist in developing course policies, in determining the choice of assignments and the level of flexibility of due dates, and in weighting assignments and assessments. For example, ask students to create classroom behavioral rules on the first day, and incorporate these into the syllabus (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). Weimer (2002, 2013) suggests that you do these four things (as I do) to balance the power in your course:

1. Include a teaching philosophy in the syllabus.
2. Talk about what your teaching philosophy means and why you are teaching this way.
3. Model this philosophy throughout the syllabus.
4. Include a description of both student and teacher expectations.

The last suggestion from Weimer really rang true for me. Until evaluating my syllabus using Cullen and Harris's rubric, I had never thought about or seen another syllabus with both student *and* teacher course expectations. Certainly I had seen scores of syllabi, including my own, that listed what was expected of students, but not one that had corresponding teacher expectations. I thought, *Why are there only expectations for students? Don't they have expectations of me as well?* In truth, this was one of the more challenging changes for me to make, but I wanted my syllabus to demonstrate that whatever I expected of my students they should also expect of me. In Figure 2a, I list only what I expect of students. To change this to be more learner-centered and to model high expectations, I repeat the same expectations under "instructor's expectations" (see Figure 2b).

Student's role. In your syllabus, do you inform students of their responsibilities? Most instructors probably communicate a calendar of assigned readings, topics, and due dates. However, if you just stop there (as I did), the syllabus typically rates as more teacher-centered (Cullen & Harris, 2009). Alternatively, do you allow students to present new material or content in class? Do any of your projects require students to generate and synthesize knowledge? If the answer is yes, and you state this explicitly in your syllabus, then your syllabus may be considered more learner-centered because it has a more well-defined student's role. But how do you do this? Based on suggestions from Weimer (2002, 2013), on the first day of class I ask my students to write a brief statement on why they are taking the course, what they expect to learn, and

Figure 2 • Power and Control: Teacher-Centered vs. Learner-Centered Syllabus Examples

(a)

Student Expectations
a. PLEASE BE ACTIVE AND PARTICIPATE IN CLASS. b. Listen and respect others. c. Be comfortable taking risks. d. Complete all assignments. e. Turn off your cell phones and/or pagers. f. Be punctual for all classes. g. Discuss class concerns either after class or during designated office hours. h. Be prepared for class by reading chapter prior to lesson.

(b)

Expectations for Students & Instructor	
Student Expectations	**Instructor Expectations**
a. PLEASE BE ACTIVE AND PARTICIPATE IN CLASS. b. Listen and respect others. c. Be comfortable taking risks. d. Complete all assignments. e. Turn off your cell phones and/or pagers. f. Be punctual for all classes. g. Discuss class concerns either after class or during designated office hours. h. Be prepared for class by reading chapter prior to lesson.	a. BE ACTIVE AND ENTHUSIASTIC TO FACILITATE STUDENT LEARNING. b. Listen and respect students' views. c. Be in class at least 5 minutes before and after class. d. Respond swiftly and effectively to student concerns. e. Turn off cell phone. f. Grade objectively, consistently, and in a timely manner. g. Be prepared for class. h. Accommodate differences in students' learning.
Please remember, if you have any questions, concerns, or comments, to let me know right away. I welcome any feedback you're willing to offer.	

Note: Syllabus element "a" is an example of a teacher-centered syllabus showing only student roles, and "b" is an example of a learner-centered syllabus showing both teacher and student roles.

what might help them achieve their learning goals. On the last day of class, I repeat this process but in the past tense (e.g., What did they achieve?). I then incorporate these paired comments into the following semester's syllabus as "Student Testimonials."

Similar to what DiClementi and Handelsman (2005) did in their study of classroom rules, Weimer (2002) suggests that another way to define the student's role is to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. On the first day of class, ask students to work in small groups to establish participation policies for the course. Take notes on these new policies, discuss them with the class, and incorporate them into the syllabus. Yet another way to define the student's role in the syllabus is to describe an assignment, as part of the participation grade, that requires each student to give a minitopic lesson (5 minutes long) once per semester. In this lesson, they are responsible for sharing new content with the class. In the end, the spirit of defining the student's role in your syllabus is to empower them and show them how to achieve their learning goals.

Outside resources. In your syllabus, are you the only source of knowledge? Or do you explain that students are responsible for seeking knowledge outside of class that requires independent investigation? If your answer is the former, your syllabus is more teacher-centered regarding this element. When I first evaluated my syllabus based on this suggestion by Cullen and Harris (2009), I scoffed at the idea that my students should be responsible for outside resources. In order for me to switch from a teacher- to a learner-centered perspective, I let my students know there would be all types of resources used in our course that extended beyond the textbook. As illustrated below, in my syllabus, I list many outside sources for my course that are identified not only by me (the instructor) but also by the students.

> *Required Textbooks*
> Brown, K. W., Cozby, P. C., Kee, D. W., & Worden, P. E. (1999). *Research methods in human development* (2nd ed.). Mountain View, CA: McGraw Hill.
>
> Schwartz, B. M., Landrum, R. E., & Gurung, R. A. (2014). *An easyguide to APA style* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. ISBN: 978-1-4522-6839-2
>
> *Outside Resources*
> - In addition to the required textbooks above, I will be using YouTube videos, online articles from sources such as blogs, ScienceDaily, the Onion, Slate Magazine, CNN, and Fox News. I will also have guest lecturers or show TEDx clips in class.
> - However, I am not the only one who will be responsible for resources in this course. You will be assigned specific class days on which you are asked to bring in current events (from any media source) that are relevant to that class period's discussion.

Syllabus tone and focus. As Cullen and Harris (2009) ask, is your syllabus focused on teacher-established policies and procedures or on policies and procedures that are negotiable? Is there little or no mention of student learning outcomes or are outcomes tied to assessments (which is important)? In addition to focus, the tone of your syllabus has significant implications for learner-centeredness. Is it written in a positive, neutral, or negative tone? How would your students describe the tone? I suspect that my past students would have said that my tone was neutral or negative, because I used to put too much emphasis on policies. Research suggests that the tone of your syllabus (e.g., friendly, positive, supportive, and rewarding) can reveal your teaching philosophy and communicate who you are as an instructor (Boysen, Richmond, & Gurung, 2015; Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002; Perrine, Lisle, & Tucker, 1995; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). To establish a good tone, use appropriate personal pronouns such as *I*, *you*, and *we*. Supply supportive information, such as a description of how to succeed in the course. Below are some success tips that you could also incorporate into your syllabus (Peters, n.d., para. 6, 7, & 9):

- *Develop effective study habits*. It is just as essential to develop your test-taking strategies and study habits as it is to learn core material. This may involve establishing a study schedule, learning about new homework approaches, and evaluating your current study techniques. You can find plenty of new ideas on the Internet, but it is better to consult with your school counselor or academic advisor in order to get the most out of your psychology courses.
- *Develop your writing skills*. Good writing skills are crucial in college. From finishing essay-exam questions to writing a formal research paper, it is very important to communicate effectively. Students who are unsure of how to structure their papers, conduct research, and identify topics will find classes difficult. Check to see if your school offers a writing lab where you can get constructive criticism, editorial reviews, and advice.
- *Dig deeper into the course*. You will learn more about different topics as the semester progresses. When you begin to study new lessons, concentrate on learning as much as you can. You will certainly gain a richer and deeper understanding of the course by reinforcing the readings and class lectures with supplemental information.

To establish a rewarding and friendly tone, use words such as *should* instead of *must* and avoid punitive statements (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002). Harnish and Bridges (2011) also suggest using welcoming and warm language, such as that shown in Table 1.

To sum up, you can make several changes to your syllabus to balance the power and control between you and your students. First and foremost among them is defining your role as a teacher by including your teaching philosophy. Second, beyond expectations for completing assignments

and readings, the syllabus should communicate student responsibilities (e.g., assisting in collectively developing parts of the syllabus). Third, model in your syllabus that students are required to bring in outside resources as part of being responsible for their own learning (e.g., news articles, TEDx talks). Finally, one of the more impactful ways to make your syllabus more learner-centered is changing its focus and tone. Using warm, friendly, and supportive language is instrumental.

The Importance of Learner-Centered Evaluation and Assessment

Many faculty members concentrate their efforts on assessment and evaluation in the classroom, but do they describe these practices in the syllabus, and are their practices learner-centered? I posed these questions to myself and discovered that I rarely described my evaluation and assessment procedures and that many of these procedures were not learner-centered. Below, I describe the evaluation/assessment element (e.g., grades, feedback mechanisms, evaluation, learning outcomes, revision/redoing) of a learner-centered syllabus and then provide several examples of how to implement these best practices into your syllabus.

Grades. Perhaps you have sincerely thought about grading policies and have a detailed description in your syllabi that reflects your beliefs about grading. From a learner-centered perspective, it is not the grading policies per se that are significant, but, rather, their focus. Cullen and Harris (2009) suggest that when we focus on losing points and penalties, we are more teacher-centered. Alternatively, if we tie grades to student learning outcomes, provide options for achieving points, and do not grade all work assigned in the course, we are more learner-centered. In evaluating my own past syllabi, I found that I had great descriptions of grading policies but tended to focus on penalties, and I never thought to tie specific grades to SLOs. Subsequently, as illustrated in Table 3, I now link all my assignments to SLOs, have removed penalties, and include a few ungraded assignments. In addition to adding the SLOs to my assignment and assessments, I added a description of how to achieve extra points, how to make up late or missed work, and how I would weight assessments and assignments that were not graded.

Feedback mechanisms. In what forms do you give feedback to your students? According to Cullen and Harris (2009), if you give only a midterm and a final and do not allow students to see the test after taking it (i.e., review it with them), then you tend to be teacher-centered. At the other end of the spectrum, if you give periodic feedback that is intended to monitor learning (e.g., both nongraded and graded quizzes, tests, papers, clickers or other lesson-response mechanisms), you tend to be more learner-

Table 3 • Example of a Learner-Centered Syllabus Element: Grading Policies

Grading Policies

Assessments				**Grading Scale**	
Assignment	Points	% of Total	SLOs	Total Points	Letter Grade Equivalent
Human Subjects Research	50	5%	5	1000–900	A
APA Style & Format	50	5%	6	899–800	B
MythBusters Analysis	50	5%	1	799–700	C
Journal Article Evaluation	50	5%	1 & 2	699–600	D
Research Proposal Part 1	50	5%	1–3	599 or less	F
Research Proposal Part 2	50	5%	1–3		
Draft of Introduction & Method	NG	NG	4–6		
Introduction & Method Paper	100	10%	4–6		
Draft of Results & Discussion Paper	NG	NG	4–6		
Results & Discussion Paper	100	10%	4–6		
Draft of Final Research Paper	NG	NG	4–6		
Final Research Paper	100	10%	4–6		
Research Presentation	100	10%	4–5		
Mid Term Exam	150	15%	1–6		
Comprehensive Exam	150	15%	1–6		
TOTAL	1000	100%			

Note. NG stands for Not Graded. On the NG assignments, I will give you feedback and suggestions on how to improve your work.

centered. Surprisingly, this was one area of my syllabus that was relatively learner-centered. However, there is always room for improvement. Specifically, I changed my syllabus to incorporate the following suggestions from Weimer (2002, 2013):

- Allow time for students to debrief (i.e., discuss the results and common errors) after assessment experiences—exams, projects, and papers—and to write their own suggestions for improvements.
- Debrief the exam in ways that promote learning (e.g., "show me why you think that answer was correct"), and discuss or debate it; maybe give some points.
- Allow students to choose "best" scores on assessments; for example, 10 of the highest quiz scores out of 12.
- Have students assess their own work before submitting it.

The question then becomes, *How are these learner-centered suggestions realized in the syllabus?* Before evaluating my syllabus using the Cullen and Harris (2009) rubric and the suggestions from Weimer (2002), I had no statement or expression of how I would provide feedback to my students. Therefore, I came up with this statement:

> *My Feedback to You* ☺ Feedback is extremely important to the learning process. As such, in this course, I will provide multiple methods of feedback. First, we will discuss your performance on quizzes and exams after you complete them. Second, you may turn in drafts of your research papers for no grade but feedback on how to improve them. Third, you will have the opportunity to choose your best 10 out of 12 quiz scores to be included in your final grade. Finally, during class you will have several (ungraded and graded) opportunities to demonstrate your understanding of what we discussed that class. These may come in what I call 1-minute papers, in which you write a summary of what we discussed, or muddy points, in which you state what remains confusing about the lesson. I will then provide feedback on your understanding during the next class period.

Not included in Cullen and Harris's (2009) rubric, but equally important to feedback, is how your students provide feedback about you. That is, how do you know you are teaching effectively, and how can you change instructional techniques based on this feedback? In my courses, I always solicit pre-, mid-, and post-course feedback on my teaching. Three times during the semester, I give my students two well-documented inventories of teaching effectiveness. These include the *Teacher Behavior Checklist* (Keeley et al., 2009) and the *Learning Alliance Inventory* (Rogers, 2012). After the mid- and post-course feedback, I adjust my classroom instruction to try to improve areas rated as deficient or low (e.g., use of humor or rapport with students).

If you are interested in getting more frequent formative feedback, you may want to use IDEA's *Instant Feedback* tool (http://www.ideaedu.org/services/student-ratings-of-instruction/). It enables students to provide instant feedback to the instructor using their smart phone following any class period. (Evidence of the reliability and validity of the instrument may be found in Benton, 2010). For example, you could ask the students to what extent you "displayed a personal interest in [them] and [their] learning," "made it clear how each topic fit into the course," and "explained material clearly and concisely." As a result of incorporating these types of feedback in my course, I include this description following the "My Feedback To You ☺" section in my syllabus:

> *Your Feedback To Me* ☺ How I provide feedback to you is equally important as how you provide feedback to me. So, in this course you will be given the opportunity to provide feedback on my instruction, the structure of the course, and how and what you need to succeed in the course. I will give these feedback opportunities three times, once at the beginning, once after the mid-term exam, and during the last week of class. After each feedback opportunity, I will adjust my instruction in the hope of improving your and future students' class experience. These feedback opportunities are anonymous (meaning I won't know who wrote what), but you will get participation points for completing them. I truly value your opinion about me and the class. It has been my experience that the class will improve because of your feedback.

Evaluation. As with feedback mechanisms, some faculty use "summative and formative evaluations including written and oral presentations, group work, self-evaluation and peer evaluation" (Cullen & Harris, 2009, p. 124). However, some teachers may assess student achievement using only tests, which is considered teacher-centered. When evaluating my syllabus for this element, I saw most of the learner-centered evaluation methods (e.g., I tied my grades to SLOs; had multiple quizzes, exams, and comprehensive exams, with the intention of providing feedback; and had group work with self-evaluations), with the exception of formative and peer evaluations. First, simply put, summative evaluations are meant to reveal what students have learned at the end of a unit or lesson, whereas formative evaluations are meant to provide feedback to both students and teachers during learning and instruction. Therefore, I attempt to incorporate both summative and formative assessments in my course and syllabus. Specifically, I state the following:

> *How you will be assessed in this class*. Throughout this course you will complete several assessments. There are two types. The first is meant to evaluate how much you have learned in the course. These are called summative assessments and may include quizzes (some graded, some not), exams, your research paper, your oral presentation of your findings, your MythBusters assignment, etc. The other type of assessment is meant to help me understand how you are learning based on my teaching (formative assessments). These may include your peer-group grade for your research project, ungraded drafts of your research paper, and almost daily classroom assessments of lessons. By assessing both (formatively and

> summatively), I can get a picture of not just how you are doing in the course but also why you are forming specific knowledge about the course.

Learning outcomes. According to Cullen and Harris (2009), your syllabus is learner-centered if it ties SLOs to specific formative and summative assessments. If it does not make this connection, this element of the syllabus is teacher-centered. Several researchers have evaluated the frequency of SLOs in syllabi and discovered that only 64% to 80% of syllabi studied included SLOs (Homa et al., 2013; Parkes, Fix, & Harris, 2003), and none tied them to assessments. Actually, I found this aspect of the syllabus quite easy to fix. If you already list SLOs on your syllabus, you can simply follow each with those assessments and assignments that attempt to assess the given SLO. For example, in Figure 3b, SLOs are linked directly to various assessments, as opposed to simply being listed as in Figure 3a).

Revising and redoing. I think many professors balk at allowing students to rewrite and redo work in their classes, because it requires more instructional time and effort. However, let me pose this (somewhat) rhetorical question: How many times have you submitted an article to a journal for publication that was accepted *without any comments or requested revisions*? If you have, *well done*! The vast majority of us have gone through countless hours of revisions, painstakingly addressing every reviewer's comments in the hope that the manuscript will be accepted. When the article is finally published, we have to admit that it is invariably better because of the peer-review process. Why wouldn't we allow the same treatment and process for our students? In my opinion, there is no reason that they should not be given the same opportunities to improve. Thus allowing our students to revise and redo is critically important to a learner-centered syllabus. Revising and redoing can come in many shapes and forms and with the help of many different parties in the course (e.g., teachers and other students). In my class, I call this process "Revise & Resubmit!" On major written assignments, I allow students to revise their paper and resubmit it for an additional 10% grade increase. In my syllabus, I state the following:

> *Revise & Resubmit*. Writing is a personal process that is ever evolving. I want you to know that I strongly believe that we all (and by that I mean myself too) can improve our writing. Therefore, on specific assignments in this class (e.g., your research paper), I will allow you to rewrite and resubmit your paper to gain an additional 10% higher grade. For each assignment, I will provide specific suggestions on how to improve your writing in the hope that you will use this to your advantage. In class, we will discuss this process further.

In summary, to construct a more learner-centered syllabus, your evaluation and assessment of both your students and yourself should focus on tying SLOs to assessment, providing

Figure 3 • Evaluation/Assessment: Teacher-Centered vs. Learner-Centered Syllabus Example

(a)

Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)

1. Become a critical consumer of developmental research by understanding a variety of methodological issues.
2. Be able to read, understand, and integrate research in human development.
3. Understand the importance of scientifically studying issues pertaining to human development.
4. Be able to apply varying research methods to study people of all developmental periods.
5. Understand the ethical considerations involved when conducting research, especially with those under 18.
6. Learn about the research process by conducting a literature review, formulating a developmental research question and hypothesis, designing and carrying out methodology to test hypothesis, analyzing data, and writing APA-formatted research paper.

(b)

Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)

1. Become a critical consumer of developmental research by understanding a variety of methodological issues (assessed by MythBusters analysis and exams).
2. Be able to read, understand, and integrate research in human development (assessed by journal article assignment and exams).
3. Understand the importance of scientifically studying issues pertaining to human development (research proposals 1 & 2 and exams).
4. Be able to apply varying research methods to study people of all developmental periods (assessed by team-based research project).
5. Understand the ethical considerations involved when conducting research, especially with those under 18 (assessed by human subjects research training and research presentation).
6. Learn about the research process by conducting a literature review, formulating a developmental research question and hypothesis, designing and carrying out methodology to test hypothesis, analyzing data, and writing APA-formatted research paper (assessed by exams and APA style & format assignment).

Note: Syllabus element "a" is an example of teacher-centered SLOs, and "b" is an example of learner-centered SLOs.

periodic feedback to monitor learning, using both formative and summative evaluation methods, and providing the opportunity for your students to revise and redo assignments and assessments.

Conclusion

There are several benefits to constructing a learner-centered syllabus. Whether you want to empower students (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005), increase rapport (Richmond, et al., 2016b; Saville et al., 2010), or increase student motivation and performance (Wilson & Wilson, 2007), constructing a learner-centered syllabus may take you one step further toward these goals. As a teacher, I want to end this article with a call to action. In other words, I have some homework for you. I invite you to take the following six steps so that your students will understand who you are as a teacher, what you expect from them as learners, and that you seek to continually improve your teaching.

Step 1. Evaluate your existing syllabus using the scale in Table 2 to identify areas for improvement.

Step 2. Create a plan for implementation by identifying which syllabus element you would like to improve.

Step 3. Experiment with your syllabus. Change your syllabus based on the guidelines and examples suggested throughout this article.

Step 4. Assess the implementation of changing your syllabus (Hint: Conduct a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project). Or publish your syllabus in outlets such as Project Syllabus by the Society of Teaching of Psychology (http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/index.php) or The Open Syllabus Project (http://opensyllabusproject.org/).

Step 5. Repeat steps 1–4.

Step 6. Never stop repeating steps 1–4.

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