



A Different Take on “Did I Miss Anything Important?”

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When students ask us, as they occasionally do, “I wasn’t in class yesterday. Did I miss anything important?” most of us feel at least a bit of disrespect and some aggravation. If we take the question at face value, it implies that the student thinks at least some of what we do in class might not actually be important. Judging from a search of online forums, instructors’ responses range from genuine interest in helping students understand what they missed and how to make up for it, to contempt exemplified by sarcastic comments such as, “No, since you weren’t present we just filled time until the class was over.” The former response was illustrated in a 2014 article in *The Teaching Professor* by Rocky Dailey, who also noted that some absences may be considered more legitimate than others (e.g., due to a student’s participating in an institution-sanctioned activity rather than just deciding not to show up). In those cases, I may feel more inclined to give the student some of my time and effort to help make up for the absence.

My focus here is neither on deciding how to respond to the student nor on the plethora of reasons that students give for missing a class. Instead, I want to turn the question around. Why do students ask this question and, more important, what does it say about my course when they do? I’m particularly concerned about students who still ask the question even after they’ve attended several class for sessions. By that time students have experienced what goes on in my classes,

and I take asking whether anything important happened in class as a sign of one or all of the following:

1. *Even after several class sessions, it is still not clear to the student that attending my classes is important, regardless of what specific activity occurred or what topic is addressed.* For example, if I deliver a lecture with a PowerPoint presentation and also post it online, am I doing enough in class beyond displaying and discussing the slides? I may think I have presented information and offered analysis beyond what was on the PowerPoint slides, but that is apparently not evident to students. Increasingly, students expect class presentations to be posted online, a position that makes sense given the amount of information I include and the pace I settle in to when using PowerPoint. However, what I add beyond what’s on the slides needs to be clear to students.
2. *Sufficient information about the importance of what will or did occur in each class has not been provided to the students.* A brief topic heading in the course syllabus is not enough. Some other options work better. Students can be assigned work that needs to be completed in advance of the class, or they can do assignments after the session. I can also provide more detailed information about the importance of class activities in relation to broader learning objectives via the syllabus.
3. *It’s an indication the student believes that only activities that are part of or explicitly related to the evaluation scheme are important in my course.* Underlying

the question, students could be asking whether they missed an unannounced quiz or exercise that counts toward their grade or whether specific information or hints were given to help prepare for an upcoming test or exam. I may need to consider how to help students better appreciate the joy and value of learning on its own. This should help them to understand that what takes place in class or what material is examined can be important in a greater context than just whether they will be evaluated on it.

I know that in my case too often I haven’t done enough in class beyond a straightforward, non-interactive PowerPoint lecture presentation. My students have been justified in wondering whether they really needed to be in class or if they could get almost the same learning by viewing the slides on their own. The impact of a PowerPoint-dominated teaching routine is especially serious in the early stages of a course

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- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
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Do Some Course Factors Motivate Students to Submit Course Evaluations?

Since course evaluations started being collected online, response rates have plummeted. In one study they ranged from 23 percent to 47 percent with the mean at 33 percent, compared with a range of 33 percent to 75 percent with a mean of 56 percent for paper evaluations. Low response rates raise the issue of representativeness.

Incentives, like extra credit, do improve those percentages, but do they encourage students to go through the motions to get the credit without providing accurate or useful feedback? There is also the lingering concern as to who evaluates the course: the students who loved it or those who hated it. Faculty opinions are mixed as to which group it might be, and research results to date haven't resolved the issue. Who is evaluating the course matters because if it's more of one group than the other, the results are biased.

These issues motivated a group of faculty researchers to see if they could identify those course factors that motivated students to submit online evaluations and whether the motivation to evaluate the course were influenced by negative or positive experiences associated with it. Their study design was unusual. Using student focus groups and relevant research, they identified five positive and five negative course feature pairs and then had students differentially weight all the pairs in relation to making the decision to submit a course evaluation. The course pairs included good grade vs. bad grade, valuable information vs. trivial information (a measure of the perceived quality of the course content), extra credit options vs. no extra credit options, high standards vs. low standards, and easy tests vs. challenging tests. Each characteristic was rated against all the others, making a 50-question forced-choice survey.

The total group chose extra credit in the course over all other course characteristics as a reason for submitting evaluations. "Thus, having extra credit options within a course presumably promotes submission of course evaluations" (24). A high grade was also high on the list of motivational characteristics. The characteristics rated the lowest were no extra credit options and a course with trivial information.

Subgroup analysis revealed that students with As and Bs on the exams and As in the course rated hard tests higher than easy ones. Rating easy tests highly does not jive with faculty views of exams, and high student ratings for course characteristics that do not promote good learning are one of the criticisms faculty regularly level against course evaluations. These researchers observe that "they pressure faculty members to cater to student desires at the expense of student learning" (28).

There was one bright spot in the findings: "Our results are contrary to the view that students are more likely to submit course evaluations when they have had a bad rather than a good course experience" (28).

The finding that extra credit motivates students to submit evaluations is interesting given the opposition to extra credit expressed by many faculty. Extra credit can be designed as an additional opportunity to master the material or explore part of it more deeply. In many courses there are few things that motivate students; if extra credit does, perhaps faculty thinking about it merits a revisit.

Reference: Jaquett, C. M., Van Maaren, V. G., and Williams, R. L. 2017. "Course Factors that Motivate Students to Submit End-of-Course Evaluations." *Innovative Higher Education* 42 (1).

Teacher Feedback: What Do We Want?

We regularly get course evaluation results, and they aren't the kind of feedback most of us want. At least, that's what the results of a recent survey showed. Questionnaire responses from almost 350 biology faculty members representing 185 different institutions found that 41 percent were dissatisfied with end-of-course evaluations and 46 percent were only satisfied with them "in some ways." The reasons given for the dissatisfaction were many: the evaluations didn't provide constructive feedback; response rates were poor; the evaluation questions didn't align with the instructor's objectives; the focus was on student satisfaction, not learning; and the process wasn't designed to really engage students in providing useful and insightful feedback. It did not matter where these faculty respondents taught. Even those at institutions where teaching was ostensibly valued were not satisfied with course evaluation feedback. And it did not matter what sort of teaching practices the respondents reported using. Those who lectured were just as unhappy with course evaluation processes as those who used active learning.

Almost 70 percent of these biology faculty received peer feedback, mostly from classroom observations, and the respondents valued peer feedback more highly than the input received from students. Even so, as the research team notes, peer observations are not "without their share of problems" (90). They aren't conducted uniformly. Only half the respondents reported use of a form or feedback template to guide the observer. If the review is part of a promotion and tenure requirement, faculty responses suggest that the observations "may be a rubber stamp rather than a real opportunity for critical feedback" (9). And as has been confirmed by studies of peer review across the years, peer assessments tend to be more positive than student evaluations.

Survey responses also described the kinds of comments peer observers

typically offered. Most frequently they concerned rapport and interaction with students, and feedback on "lecture-related behaviors" such as clarity of explanations, organization, speaking style, content, and demeanor (6). Far fewer colleague comments were made about time management (of the class session), learning objectives and class goals, effectiveness of class activities, or the quality of assignments.

Even those at institutions where teaching was ostensibly valued were not satisfied with course evaluation feedback.

As for what kind of feedback these faculty wanted, they "continued to select both students and peers as valuable sources of feedback, and this was true regardless of institution type" (8). In lieu of the usual end-of-course ratings, faculty identified more novel strategies such as mid-course evaluations, data about student learning, and alumni evaluations. They wanted to select their peer reviewers, opting for those with experience, those recognized as excellent teachers, those teaching similar courses, and colleagues with knowledge of evidence-based teaching strategies and educational research.

In their discussion of the results, these researchers explored the disconnect between current interests in active learning and evidence-based strategies, and the didactic nature of both course evaluation forms and peer feedback. Forms that ask questions about lecture skills create expectations that good teachers are supposed to lecture and not use activities that directly involve students in learning processes. Peers too regularly offer comments on presentations skills, rarely mentioning learning or assessment.

One of the questions underlying this research is the role of feedback in improving instruction. In this case, researchers were interested in feedback that moves faculty more toward evidence-based practices. "To support instructional change, faculty clearly need more than just knowledge of effective teaching strategies. They also need motivation, support, critical reflection and concrete suggestions for improvement" (10). That kind of feedback can come from students and peers, but it does not given current practices. The 1980s and early 1990s saw a plethora of studies exploring student ratings and the widespread adoption of course evaluation procedures. The use of both has remained pretty much unchanged since then. Given the lack of satisfaction with both but a continuing belief in their potential to improve instruction, this research makes it clear that the time for change has come.

These researchers point out that this was a survey of biology faculty, but they think the reaction of faculty in other STEM fields would be the same. Could we assume that they are the likely assessments of faculty across the board?

Reference: Brickman, P., Gormally, C., and Martella, A. M. 2016. "Making the Grade: Using Instructional Feedback and Evaluation to Inspire Evidence-Based Teaching." *Cell Biology Education* Winter: 1–14. 🌱

Four Ways to Teach More Effectively

“No scientist wanting to remain at the leading edge of a field would use a research technique judged no longer as effective as an alternative. Shouldn’t we apply the same standard to teaching?” (2151) Substitute the word “scholar” for “scientist,” and it’s a question that should be put to everyone who teaches. What’s no longer deemed as effective is lecturing compared to the alternative of active learning. Many faculty members don’t use much active learning even though many now acknowledge that they should. This article offers four ways to get started or to move forward in your use of active learning.

Design from Back to Front

Backward design as conceived by Wiggins and McTighe starts with course-level learning goals instead of content. You start with what you want students to know and be able to do at the end of the course. These large goals lead to learning objectives (i.e., what students will do to demonstrate that they’ve achieved the goals). Once you’ve got how the learning will be assessed, the content can be identified. Of course, students will need opportunities to practice and will need feedback to help them improve. Because backward design is so student-focused, it is difficult to implement without having students engaged in the hard, messy work of learning. It’s a way to design courses that promote active learning.

For those with heavy teaching loads, course design (or redesign) sounds daunting, and while it is time consuming, the authors point out that you don’t have to do a whole course all at once. You can start with one course goal and move back through objectives and assessment to content. At the end of this article there’s a reference to a recent article that contains an excellent planning tool for incorporating backward design.

The point of this piece is well taken. Most faculty don’t think seriously about course design. More often they’re

focused on all that has to be covered in the course. Course design activities, most notably use of the backward design approach, can improve both teaching and learning.

Aim High, beyond Just the Facts

Unfortunately, students get lots of practice memorizing facts. They become very good at it. What they aren’t so good at is understanding why the facts are important or how they connect. Moreover, a focus on facts does not give students opportunities to think at higher levels.

What do teachers want students to know and be able to do five years after having taken the course? Of course, that will include some facts, but in most cases the facts will be supportive of the larger, more central concepts of the field. Isolated information bits don’t easily coalesce into coherent understandings. Said another way, the content needs to stop being the end and start being the means faculty use to lead students to larger understandings and ways of thinking that typify how knowledge advances in a discipline.

Pose Messy Problems

Messy problems are those open-ended, rich, poorly structured, sometimes “wicked problems.” They can’t be answered directly. There isn’t one right answer. And these are the kinds of problems most professionals face. Students’ abilities to deal with messy problems must be developed, but as their skills grow so does their level of engagement with each other and with course content.

Expect Students to Talk, Write, and Collaborate

“Through these activities, students can become aware of what they do not know or understand . . . which ideally prompts them to think more deeply or seek more information to clarify

their understanding. The process of explaining requires students to integrate new and existing knowledge” (2153). Initially, these activities don’t need to be complicated. The teacher can ask a question and students can talk with each other before the teacher solicits answers. Clickers can record first answers, which can then be discussed with others before they are answered a second time. Ideas and opinions can first be written down then shared and discussed. Students can learn from each other, and teachers can design activities that make that a more likely outcome.

The article concludes with straightforward and sanguine advice about learning to teach more effectively. It’s good advice if you’ve just started moving in the direction of more active learning or if active learning is your preferred approach. All teachers can improve.

- Avoid reinventing the wheel. All sorts of good resources are available.
- Try one thing at a time. Start with something comfortable or tackle one of those parts of the students routinely find difficult if you’re more seasoned.
- Learn from colleagues. Watch them teach, and let them watch you teach.
- Be transparent with students. After explaining what they need to do, ask them why you’re having them do it that way. Don’t assume what’s obvious to you about your approach is equally apparent to them.

References: Dolan, E. L., and Collins, J. P. 2015. “We Must Teach More Effectively: Here Are Four Ways to Get Started.” *Microbiology of the Cell* 26 (June): 2151–2155.

Reynolds, H. L., and Kearns, K. D. 2017. “A Planning Tool for Incorporating Backward Design, Active Learning and Authentic Assessment in the College Classroom.” *College Teaching* 65 (1): 17–27. 🌱

Multitasking While Studying for an Exam

Given the predilection of students to check devices of various sorts during class, even when there's a prohibitive policy supported by regular teacher admonitions, it's not surprising that students do it when they are studying, even when their study is focused on preparing for an upcoming exam. Furthermore, it's not surprising that regular interruptions during study times negatively affect exam performance. But it's nice to have the details, like those provided by this study.

The study uses naturalistic investigation, in this case being conducted when students in sections of introductory psychology courses were studying for an exam. After taking the exam they completed a survey in which they reported how long they had studied and how many of 23 different social media and electronic devices they used during the time they studied. Listening to music and watching TV or a movie were included on the list.

The researcher divided the students into groups depending on how long they reported studying; less than two hours were placed in a low study group and more than two hours in a high study group. Students were divided into groups depending on the number of digital media technologies they used: 0–2 were low users, 3–6 medium users, and over 7 high users. The mean study time was 120 minutes (SD = 83.07), and the mean level of multitasking was 4.88 (SD = 2.94). The mean exam score was 71.81 (SD = 13.28). Do note that while preparing for this exam during that two-hour study window, students used five different technologies in addition, one would assume, to their textbook and class notes.

As for the results, the low-level media multitaskers had a mean exam score 4.74 points higher than the high-level media multitaskers a statistically significant difference. Students in the high study category also had higher scores on the exam than those in the low study category,

and those scores were statistically significant, as should be expected. The negative impact of multitasking on exam scores is consistent with many other studies, although most of them looked at multitasking during actual class sessions rather than out-of-class study times.

Most faculty find it frustrating to try to keep students off their devices during class, and there's pretty much no hope at all of controlling what they do while they're studying.

“Results also indicate that the level of media multitasking did not significantly affect study time. Students averaged 2 hr [sic] of study, and even if they multitasked with many different digital medias, [sic] the amount of study time was not adjusted to compensate for possible distractions” (54). At this point the researcher references findings from an observational study in which students switched tasks every six minutes (six minutes of studying, six minutes on Facebook, for example). If that were the case with this cohort, they would only be spending 18 minutes of every two hours on the primary task of studying for the exam.

The caveat here is that in this research students self-reported both the amount of time they studied and the number of digital media they used. There is some research indicating that students overestimate their use of some social media. The results of this study may not be as dramatic as they appear.

Most faculty find it frustrating to try to keep students off their devices during class, and there's pretty much no hope at all of controlling what they do while they're studying. But as this

researcher notes teachers can and should make students aware that this shifting from one task to another has costs. (They're called “switch costs” in the research.) Efficiency and performance are both affected. In this study exam scores were lower, and most students do care about their exam scores. Teachers can also focus on skills associated with self-regulating while studying as well as model or provide in-class experiences that showcase the effectiveness of evidence-based study strategies.

A side benefit of this article are references to any number of amazing details regarding multitasking and digital technologies. Here are two examples.

- Thirty-nine percent of all college-aged digital natives report they are unable or unwilling to go ten minutes without checking digital media.
- University students exposed to both internet content and a TV switched their attention between them more than four times a minute, and these participants were mostly unaware of their task-switching behavior.

Reference: Patterson, M. C. 2017. “A Naturalistic Investigation of Media Multitasking while Studying and the Effects on Exam Performance.” *Teaching of Psychology* 44 (1): 51–57. 🌱

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Question of the Day Promotes Class Participation

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Most of us have experienced the dreaded quiet class. Typically, it's the class where only a few students speak and it's always the same three or four. Everyone else sits passively and waits out the clock. For those classes and others, I've found a question of the day an effective method of promoting participation.

It's an approach that gets students thinking and speaking on a course-related topic. The expectations are that everyone speaks and all answers are accepted and welcome. Sometimes the question of the day assesses student's prior knowledge of the topic; sometimes it asks for an opinion, and sometimes it asks for an application of a course concept. Typically, the class session starts with the question of the day. I use it to set the day's learning purpose. Each student provides a brief response, typically taking no more than twenty seconds.

The method doesn't need to be used every class session, but it could be. It works best if you let students know that you are interested in their thoughts on a topic and are not asking questions that have a single right answer. I recommend asking divergent questions related to the topic of the day. If that is not possible, the question should relate to course objectives or outcomes. I provide the question in writing (on the board or projected) to help students who process

information visually. It's also important to give students some think time after you've posed the question and to remind them that they should offer a concise response. You may want to ask in advance if a particular student would lead off with the first answer. I start with a different student each day. After the last student has responded, I thank students for their participation and summarize key ideas. If you keep track of the questions you've asked, you can use them the next time you teach the course.

The method has numerous applications and can be used in small and large classes, with some adaptations. Here are a few variations that I have explored.

- Provide the question in advance by sharing it on Blackboard or through your course management system. This helps students who feel pressure to speak when they aren't prepared, are anxious about speaking, or need more time to think.
- In large classes, have partners share with each other. This variation still meets the method's goals and creates an intimate sharing space. Encourage students to share with a different partner each class session.
- Decide if it is permissible for students to pass on a question, perhaps limiting the number of passes. Interestingly, no student has ever passed on any of my questions after two years of implementing the method.
- Decide if students can repeat a response already presented by

someone else. This may depend on the question and how many different responses are possible. If duplicate answers are acceptable, then students should focus on explaining their answer.

- If time allows, pose a question at the beginning of class and a different (or the same) question at the close of class. If the question asks about students' level of knowledge or confidence on a certain topic, the same question can serve as a pre- and post-assessment after a class discussion, lecture, or other learning activity.
- Rather than having students share in a predictable order, randomly call on students, but be sure that all students are asked to participate.

In my courses, the impact of this method has been significant. Students have indicated that they look forward to seeing the question of the day written on the board when they arrive. Several students have mentioned that the question of the day lets them know that I care about them and am interested in their thoughts and ideas. It's a method that creates a safe environment for sharing. I noticed typically quiet students volunteering more frequently after I started using this method. I also learned a great deal about students by just asking a question. In small classes, the question for the day doesn't take long, and the time it takes has numerous payoffs. 🌱

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when I'm creating expectations for how the course will be taught. So although I feel the aggravation when I'm asked whether anything important happened in a class, it triggers a re-examination of my teaching methods and consideration of how I can better make class time an

essential part of learning the content and succeeding in the course.

I accept that students will, for various reasons, not always attend class. Instead of having a casual attitude with regard to attendance, I want students in my courses to appreciate by default the importance of attending class and the drawbacks of not attending. Therefore, instead of students' asking, "Did I miss

anything important?" I want to change their question to, "By missing your class I know I missed [something important]. Is it possible to make up what I missed, and if so, what do I need to do?" To achieve this, I need to reflect upon why students in my classes do not always understand the importance of attending every class. 🌱

Teaching Those Courses Students Don't Want to Take

And there seems to be lots of them: required general education courses in content areas the student deems completely uninteresting, those with a reputation for being hard, and others that require skills students know they don't have and feel they cannot acquire. With all that teaching entails—content to get through, material to prepare, assignments to grade, office hours, and e-mail—students' obvious negative attitudes are just one more thing that doesn't make the job easy or pleasant. However, in most cases there are good reasons for students to be taking these courses and those are also reason enough for us to commit to doing what we can to change students' minds. So, here's some strategies. Most of them aren't new or terribly creative, but all of them have been known to work.

Make It Relevant

Make the reasons why this content should be learned known to students early in the course. Don't assume that saying it once will be enough. Let the relevance, usefulness, and value of the content be a chorus you sing throughout the course. Remember that showing and demonstrating are almost always more compelling than telling. And let there be other voices—employers, former students, notables of all sorts—who attest through comments on the course website, podcasts, and quotations shared in class that the material this course covers is essential knowledge. Regularly point out that students at the front ends of their lives do not know with certainty what they will be doing later in life.

Use Content Strategically and Developmentally

Start the course with some of your best stuff. A bit of salesmanship in the beginning is not a bad thing. Point out what is it about the content in this course that you find especially interesting, useful, amazing, or maybe even fanciful. Start with tasks that aren't necessarily

easy but do offer a reasonable chance for success. Students benefit when they encounter success early in a course requiring skills they don't have because it builds confidence and motivation.

Fan the flame of students' interest, add more dry kindling, do what you can to make it catch and burn.

Blow on Any Spark of Interest You See

Fan the flame of students' interest, add more dry kindling, do what you can to make it catch and burn. In every course, even the ones most students don't want to take, there are some less resistant students, some whose curiosity can be piqued, some who can be persuaded, and a few who come to the course interested in the content. It doesn't take a whole lot of interested students to influence how the rest of the class responds or to make your fire hot enough to dry out some of the wet wood.

Let Your Love of the Content Show

Be shameless, show your passion, and wear it on your sleeve. Yes, there's a certain amount of risk involved in doing so. Academics are known to be interested in some pretty esoteric stuff. In love with old books, water beetles, the periodic table, regression analysis, really? But just beyond the campus stand countless professionals who found their life's work in a college course with content they originally thought was weird and wouldn't like. Future professionals are enrolled in your courses this semester.

Love Learning

And let that be all kinds of learning. Let students know that you're still learning and not just about more of the

content you already know gobs about. Be learning new things, things outside your comfort zone; things that are hard; things that you couldn't do when you first tried, still couldn't do the second time, and got frustrated and mad at the third time. Talk about what you're learning with students. Every course should offer students the opportunity to learn more about learning even if they never do fall in love with the content.

Be Convinced Students Can Do It

Not all of them will be able to achieve success in class, but in the vast majority of cases, it won't be because they can't. It will be because they didn't. We work with students who make decisions that put their success in the course at risk. We see students with questionable abilities. We have students who fail, and in some cases it's not a surprise. Teachers do not have divine insight, but we do know what students in trouble look like, and we have an obligation to be clear about all that success will require. Then we can stand there, ready to support their efforts knowing that students, even in students in trouble, have a much greater chance of succeeding if they have a teacher who believes in them.

Refuel Your Tanks

It takes lots of effort to get a fire going when it's damp and windy and the snowflakes are flying. Our efforts aren't always going to be successful, or we may not be around to see success. Some fires smolder a long time before they catch. By that time, we're someplace else, working with another pile of wet wood. So be mindful of how long and hard you've worked. Rest and refuel. Doing so is a necessity, not an option. This is not work you can do well if your tanks are empty. 🌲

Syllabus Format May Enhance Understanding of Course Requirements

By Betsy Wackernagel Bach, University of Montana; Alison M. Lietzenmayer, Old Dominion University; and Mary Lahman, Manchester University
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Over the years, course syllabi have evolved from a simple outline of course objectives and requirements to an intimidating, multi-paged contract of terms and conditions for successful course completion. A number of writers have proposed syllabus makeovers, including some who've suggested the syllabus be offered in newsletter style. Others have proposed quizzing students on the syllabus as a way to encourage them to read it carefully.

We decided to try these two ideas and investigate if they helped students understand four essential course requirements: course objectives, course policies, procedures for late work, and the number of exams. Each of us created one traditional course syllabus and one graphically enhanced syllabus in newsletter format, randomly distributing each type on the first day of class. We quizzed students on the course requirements on the second day of class. Both syllabi contained identical content.

The newsletter syllabi were designed using a newsletter template readily available in word processing programs. We tried for designs that highlighted important parts and were graphically pleasing to read.

One of our goals as instructors is to place the responsibility for learning experiences on students. We thought a more engaging syllabus format might be more intellectually invigorating. Moreover, for those of us who include student learning objectives (SLOs), we hoped that offering them in this format might stimulate more self-regulated student learning.

Each of us reviewed syllabus content as part of normal first-day activities and

asked students to review the syllabus prior to the next class, emphasizing that there would be a quiz on syllabus content. In addition to questions about course requirements, the quiz also contained an open-ended question that asked for student reactions to the type of syllabus they received. Quizzes and syllabi were distributed in a total of six classes, and

One of our goals as instructors is to place the responsibility for learning experiences on students.

we received responses from 146 students, 46 percent of whom were enrolled in upper-division courses, and 54 percent of whom were in lower-division courses. Of those upper- and lower-division students, 25 percent were online, and 74 percent were face-to-face.

When we graded the quizzes, we found that upper-division students who received the newsletter-style syllabi scored higher on each of the four quiz questions. Lower-division students scored higher on all questions except the one on course policies, where they scored an average of 77 percent correct, to those who received a traditional syllabus, who scored an average of 84 percent correct.

In their responses to the open-ended question, students stated that, regardless of format, they liked syllabi that got their attention and were "pleasing to the eye." They wanted syllabi that were easy to read so that they could locate important items, such as course policies. Students also appreciated a syllabus that was "clear and straightforward," where they could "find due dates," and have sufficient detail but that was not "too long" or "too wordy." A final theme of syllabus organization emerged in which students expressed appreciation for chunking

information into well-organized, easily digestible parts.

Those students receiving traditional syllabi provided few comments about the format, except for the fact that it was "familiar." With the newsletter format, however, students again commented on "aesthetics," indicating that the newsletter syllabus was "fresh," "attention-grabbing," "artsy," and "visually appealing." Four students found the pictures "distracting," and three others thought the syllabus was "confusing."

So, which syllabus format is better for students? The quiz scores did provide some, but not conclusive, evidence that a newsletter format aided understanding course requirements. Responses to the open-ended responses offered additional supportive insights. If students see "familiar" as the main descriptor of a traditional syllabus, then using a newsletter syllabus may generate some excitement about the course, which may mean more students' deciding that the syllabus is worth reading. The positive comments about newsletter formats' being "more inviting" and "aesthetically pleasing" also hint at greater student engagement.

Many instructors believe the syllabus should introduce students to the course's learning objectives, but many students look at the syllabus only as a calendar, detailing what they have to have done by when. A graphically enhanced syllabus might be a mechanism instructors can use to address these cross-purposes, especially if there is a focus on SLOs during first-day activities. Instructors who employ a graphically enhanced syllabus can more easily direct students' attention to the learning objectives and encourage them to participate in their education from the first day. They can also discuss how self-regulated learning contributes to successful course completion. 🌱