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Syllabi: Change Documents for Counselor Education

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Abstract

Counseling courses reflect change via the syllabi that accompany them. These documents outline goals in course objectives; change interventions in assignments and activities; and measures of progress in grades. Despite their importance, relatively little exists in the literature on syllabi development or their meaning to the change process in counselor education.

Keywords: syllabus, counselor education, counselor training

Introduction

From an organizational perspective, change is essential as a way to improve, expand, and grow and is needed to survive and thrive. The way in which an organization manages change is crucial to the overall outcome. Merrell (2012) discussed common activities of effective change-oriented organizations and found that they “. . . balance rational, data-driven approaches with a deep understanding of emotional drivers” (p. 20). He also outlined six critical components to managing change, including leading; communicating; learning; measuring; involving; and sustaining, all of which combine to aid organizations in performing more successfully in their respective arenas (Merrell, 2012). Facilitating change, however, can be a challenging task. Atkins (2010) reviewed eight errors that cause organizations to fail, including too much complacency and underestimating vision. Leaders must find and utilize strategies to prevent errors from occurring, thereby aiding in the success of organizational change (Atkins, 2010).

In this article, we propose the notion that counselor education programs can be viewed as organizations of change. In this regard, consumers (students) utilize products (courses) to obtain a more significant product (master's degree), and, as a result, leave the

system (program) as a changed individual and an emerging professional. Given this conceptualization, counselor educators are inherently change agents with the hope that, by the end of an individual course, students will learn, gain knowledge about the topic and perhaps themselves, and consequently grow in one or more ways. The essence of this article is to note the importance of syllabi in course development, discuss research related to them, and offer ideas for counselor educators in their conceptualization.

A Brief Evolution of Syllabi Roles and Functions

From an instructional perspective, we posit that the syllabus represents a change document. The syllabus, described by Habanek (2005) as the “major communication device” of details of student learning (p. 62), has evolved over time from a mere outlined list of topics to a much more detailed document (Becker & Calhoon, 1999). It is believed that the syllabus first made an appearance in educational settings in the late 18th century by listing topics to be covered in lectures (Snyder, 2002). Over time, the document grew to include detailed course descriptions that set the stage for how students would traverse a course, meet its goals and objectives, and to describe how learning would be assessed throughout. Parkes and Harris (2002) proposed three key roles and functions of syllabi: a “contract,” a “permanent record,” and “serving as an aid to student learning” (p. 35). These functions reflect how the syllabus has become a multifaceted document designed to benefit student learning and accountability and to define roles and responsibilities of both student and instructor. Additionally, syllabi may also serve the purpose of supporting program accreditation by demonstrating adherence to an accrediting body’s expectations (Parkes & Harris, 2002).

As it has evolved from a course outline, a syllabus has become a key element in establishing power in the classroom. It can be an opportunity for professors to take control, as well as to give students some control over their learning. Often, a very rigid syllabus deters students from wanting to learn. By distributing some power, as it pertains to the course, a professor can promote an increase in students’ motivation to learn (Weimer, 2013).

At the same time, students’ perceptions of syllabi are important in terms of the utility of such documents. In their survey of 984 undergraduate students, Appling, Gancar, Hughes, and Saad (2012) found that 80% of participants consulted syllabi at least weekly and that 87% of participants viewed the document as positive and essential for course success. At the same time, a vast majority of participants (80%) indicated that they had received a course syllabus that was not helpful or did not fulfill their expectations. Finally, nearly all participants (95%) stressed the importance of planning related to syllabi and the inclusion of test dates in them.

These findings relate to Becker and Calhoon (1999), who found that students enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course focused mainly on dates of exams and assignments; material covered in exams; and procedures and policies in grading, and to Garavalia, Hummel, Wiley, and Huitt (1999), who surveyed faculty and students on important syllabi components. In the latter study, both groups expressed a preference for comprehensiveness in the document and agreed that items such as the instructor’s e-mail address, the course grading scale, and a listing of topics should be included. At the same

time, students and faculty also indicated that syllabi should not be static and should be revised as necessary during a semester.

Other aspects of the literature on syllabi have focused on how style and content may affect student attitude and learning experience. DiClementi and Handelsman (2005) addressed how perception of the instructor and the course, initially introduced by the syllabus, “could determine level of engagement in the course” (p. 16). Thompson (2007) explored teacher challenges in syllabus presentation, noting that syllabi often contain conflicting functions such as creating a welcoming learning environment while also exerting the authority of accountability and rule adherence. She described syllabi as “communicative documents” by which instructors can create an atmosphere hospitable to learning while fostering awareness of rigorous course requirements (p. 70). The role of syllabi in higher education has continued to broaden, encompassing methods of learning, a contract of accountability, and an expression of the professor’s commitment and involvement in the learning process (Habanek, 2005). Instructors sometimes use the course syllabi to introduce areas of interest and aspects of personality that allow students to get to know them. DiClementi and Handelsman (2005) explored how allowing students to take part in establishing course rules—rather than having a list of guidelines given to them in the syllabus—may foster enhanced student comfort, compliance with rules, and a more favorable attitude toward the instructor and overall course.

More recent studies have focused on syllabus length and perception of instructors. Saville, Zinn, Brown, and Marchuk (2010) found that students shown both a brief and more detailed hypothetical course syllabus reported more favorable perceptions of the instructor of the detailed syllabus than the instructor of the brief syllabus. Not only did participants associate the instructor of the more detailed syllabus with more master teaching qualities, but they also indicated that they would be more likely to recommend the course to other students and be more likely to take another course with that instructor. They concluded, “Thus, in addition to serving a communicative function, a detailed syllabus might signal to students that their teacher is competent and wants them to do well” (p. 186). Jenkins, Bugeja, and Barber (2014) found that additional restrictive boundary detail in syllabi, such as firm deadlines with course assignments, heightens instructor perception, perhaps because it aided the instructor in being viewed as an “authoritative professional” (p. 133).

Syllabi As Change Documents

In the classroom of the counselor educator, the delivery of the syllabus is critical to course success, yet, to our knowledge, little training is delivered in this specific area of teaching. This statement applies to counselor education and perhaps other academic domains. In her review of 25 syllabi from one university, Habanek (2005) found that only three of them met all of her criteria deemed as informative documents whereby the instructor displayed enthusiasm and offered sufficient information for instructor-student agreement in accountability. Only 20% of the syllabi, for instance, included details about class dates and assignments.

The following section involves a reflection of the primary author (JM) and his perspectives on syllabi as change documents. At the outset of a course—and before sharing my final syllabus with them—I (JM) often ask students to briefly write how they

want to be different by the end of the course. In other words, what gains are important to them during the course? By knowing their perspectives, I can enter into a dialogue with them about the degree to which the course will fit their expectations. The following points are meant to bridge common parts of the syllabus with facilitating change, being mindful that such documents serve as vital documents to be constructed carefully and with mindfulness.

Syllabi often include the following segments at a minimum: course objectives; textbooks/instructional materials; assignments (with rubrics); a timeline/semester schedule; and grading policies. The fact that syllabi are distributed to students in a written format serves at least two purposes: a) it confers the importance of the information contained within them; and b) it serves as a referral base for the instructor–student learning process, as any subsequent questions or conflicts that arise may be settled by the content contained in the syllabus.

In discussing the various elements of a syllabus, I (JM) am not implying that they should be placed in the order here. As documents of change, they are constructed in a way that instructors conceptualize change. From a “problem-solving” process of change, the sequential order of challenges (aims), ways to resolve the challenges (implementation), and the timing of the implementation may make sense. Applied to a syllabus, it would translate to placing the goals (course objectives) first, followed by the plan (assignments) and assessment/timeline (course schedule). Regardless of the general order, the syllabus should be designed with the course participant (student) in mind. What structure would be most understandable for them? How can this “plan” be most clearly communicated? If the instructor were reading it through the viewpoint of students, how would the syllabus appear?

A course description may be placed at the outset of the syllabus. While brief, this description covers a background of the content of the course that is often taken from the university catalog. The importance of a course description lies in its consistency: Regardless of the instructor of the course, the class will cover similar content based on this description. The foundation of the course starts with these two or three sentences of the description.

Course objectives may be viewed as desired futures, as they set out the sought after competencies in participants by the conclusion of the course. The development of accurate course descriptions is integral to course success. It is one matter to have an approximation of where the instructor would like students to be by the end of the term. However, it is another matter to know the specific desired competencies. The course objectives, then, represent the driving force of the syllabus.

With the course overview and intended goals set, the question of how to bridge the goals with outcomes is raised. In syllabi, the essence of academic change is one of assignments. What products must the course participant complete in order to reach the competencies postulated in the course objectives? The critical element is the connection between the assignment and the objectives and ensuring that relevancy is present. An assignment required simply because the instructor has included it in past courses may not make sense if it has no effect on aiding students reach the course objectives. Sometimes syllabi are more explicit, as they link the assignment with the course objectives to which they relate. In essence, then, the assignments represent a metaphorical bridge from the starting point of objectives to the end result of grades.

The evaluation of the participants is demonstrated in the grading scheme. In a counseling treatment plan, the assessment of the degree to which a client accomplished goals may be a part of the discharge or ending summary note. Simply put, evaluation or assessment can be seen as collecting information as a way to make decisions. Such a course is required in many counseling programs. In a syllabus, it may be the section on which students carefully focus. The information that is collected—the grades on the assignments—dictates a final grade. The measurement of the grade may be done via a rubric, a specific set of criteria that demonstrate varying degrees of success.

One section of a syllabus worth considering is course guidelines. Sulik and Keys (2014) examined the socialization capability that syllabi have within undergraduate, introductory sociology courses and identified four themes, including that of establishing a classroom climate around active learning and thinking critically. This notion could apply to graduate-level counseling courses. Just as counseling is a culture dictated by norms and values, the course guidelines set the fundamental rules that are part of the essential classroom culture desired by the instructor. They may concern such items as the class starting on time, how late assignments will be assessed, extra credit activities, and the use of cell phones during class. With each guideline, a value is communicated. For instance, a guideline around classes starting on time reflects punctuality, and an item on how course discussions are processed may reflect a culture of respect and attentiveness.

A related section found in some syllabi is the instructor's teaching philosophy, which may also describe significant values in the classroom atmosphere. Instructors' views of teaching and learning can communicate how they teach, what is emphasized, and important expectations of course participants. In counseling syllabi, a counselor educator may note codes of ethics, professional involvement and various associations, and the respective university's undergraduate or graduate policies.

Finally, the semester or term schedule is consistent with short-term markers of academic change. Certain formative goals and assessments are conducted over the course of the class to measure course participants' performance in meeting the course objectives. The schedule displays direction toward the intended aims or goals for the instructor and students and enables course participants to be aware of markers along the course journey.

At the conclusion of many courses, an evaluation of the instructor is often completed by students and may also be listed in the syllabus. Most evaluative methods involve an anonymous, standardized measure that is uniform across courses in a program or department. Just as Beck (2011) discussed the importance of client feedback in the process of counseling, the seeking of formative feedback from course participants during the semester is also a possible item to include in the schedule of a syllabus.

Finally, it is important to note that course syllabi need to be modified as the counseling profession, accreditation standards, and programmatic objectives change. Piercy (2015) noted that the field of marital and family therapy is rapidly evolving and discussed the updating and consequent challenges of a course syllabus in that domain: "My so-called minor course update (ha!) is like overlaying a map of a new world over one reflecting interesting but more defined territory" (p. 1). His analogy could likely apply to many areas within counseling and therapy, and staying abreast of recent developments in the profession is vital for counselor educators as they plan their course documents.

Conclusion

Professional counselors put a great deal of decision-making into their treatment planning, and, while the two documents are inherently different in goals and scope, we contend that counselor educators may start with a similar mindset in syllabi development. Syllabi can drive classroom processes, and, as such, they can be a vital consideration to instructional success. If it is assumed that students enroll in counseling courses to learn, then counselor educators are facilitators of growth. Change is a critical element in both counseling and counselor education, and the way in which syllabi are presented can be an important conceptualization point around counselor development.

Finally, the tone embedded in syllabi and treatment plans is a vital element. Habanek (2005) suggested that messages of enthusiasm and collaboration be a part of syllabi in creating a positive atmosphere of learning. The latter concept of collaboration is a hallmark of counseling, and it is that notion of working together toward change that can be inherent in both syllabi and treatment plans.

Course syllabi are documents that navigate academic development, and, as in any process, the path may not be direct. They should be adaptive, flexible, and subject to reevaluation. Garavalia et al. (1999) conceded that an ideal syllabus may be impossible, and, as such, it may behoove counselor educators to examine and frequently reexamine these documents of change.

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