

INVESTIGATING STUDENT'S COGNIZANCE IN UTILISING COURSE SYLLABUS INFORMATION BOOKLET IN THEIR LEARNING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

It is a norm for misalignment between students and educators in understanding objective of the learning outcomes and its application upon completion of the module. The insignificant enforcement or standard to emphasize its delivery to students have created a different understanding among students. In Malaysia, the higher education has vastly adapted quality assurance mechanisms in its programme design, module content, course delivery and assessment and evaluation methods. A wide range of learning activities and pedagogical methods has evolved in this contemporary and virtual education system. Therefore, it is important for educators to equip with preliminary guidelines for the students in preparation on their time management and learning process. The purpose of this study is to investigate the student awareness in utilising their course syllabus information. The study was conducted in few private institutions whereby the students are required to utilize their course syllabus to understand their learning scope. The outcomes of this study indicate that students are well aware of the important of course syllabus which exhibit a better learning effectiveness. However, students seem to be acclimatized to the hypothesized information and instructional guide. This may suggest educator to re-look into information arrangement and simplified message.

Keywords: *Course syllabus, learning outcomes, efficient and effective teaching methods, social interaction, higher education, campus environment, teaching and learning assessment.*

INTRODUCTION

Syllabus information is a form of contract or agreement between the department – in which educators act as a proxy and the students. This contract includes the decision, along with a structured plan on how the course is design to meet the efficient practise to educate students within its disciplinary matter. The department and qualified educators collaboratively designed the entire holistic curriculum using their best judgement and experience about the specific contact that need to be adhered. This may include the curriculum of the entire program to specific individual modules as well as it best pedagogical approaches that fulfilled the learning outcomes.

Course syllabus information constitutes mutual agreement between educators and students from basic to specific information. This can be elucidated into three course syllabus elements. First, general information, which includes course contents, pre-requisite requirements, and course policies including grading and other general course information such as contact information and consultation hours. Second, course syllabus information can be specifically state the plan that the students may go through the entire semester, which includes required and recommended texts; required assignment and its description; grading criteria and course calendar. Third, it states course and university policy information that equip students with rules and regulations by which, they need to oblige and other information systems that may assist students in learning.

Course syllabus is designed to illustrate synchronization of programme to specific subject learning outcomes. In addition, it helps to map out clearly how resources (e.g. books, equipment, time) and class activities (e.g. teacher-talk, group work, practical, discussions) and assessment strategies (e.g. tests, quizzes, homework) will be used to ensure that the process of learning meet its objectives of the course successfully. The course syllabus is usually an interpretation of a specification or syllabus, which can be used as a guide throughout the course to monitor progress against the original plan. In other words, a pinnacle can bestow an overview of the module that is being taught.

In most educational institutions, the course syllabus is used as part of planning an essential aspect of teaching and is even more effective when it is a process that is collaborative with your colleagues and students (Mawer, 1995). In addition, course syllabus is a long term planning solution to identify the learning opportunities across a whole school year (Gower, 2004).

Despite the almost universal agreement on the need for a syllabus in tertiary education, what actually constitutes a syllabus – content, format, and function – remains unclear? The lack of consensus may derive from the need of the syllabus to fulfil multiple purposes and to satisfy multiple constituents (Doolittle & Siudzinsla, 2010). This little thought, may suggest that there is a need for educator to observe and analyse the students responsiveness in comprehend course syllabus information what ought to be important and otherwise.

Altman (1999) suggests that syllabus goals can only be achieved if the syllabus provides sufficient information, however, this may not be the only problem facing the instructor's syllabus. The instructor would expect students to read and remember the pertinent information they deem important. Even though an instructor may believe that all of the information in the syllabus is of great importance, it does not necessarily follow that the students will attach the same weight to that information neither would the students have achieved the learning outcome. Thereupon the syllabus is also the yardstick of the course that may encompass a process orientation and how that determines your expectations of the students. It also explains the agenda for the course, how the course structure reinforces goals and objectives, how the activities and assignments will help them to meet both content and process goals.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyse the awareness among students in utilising course syllabus as one of the tool for learning by students of higher educational institutions. This issue perhaps is recurrent, however, it would provide insightful

information in analysing student awareness of course syllabus documents and it is believed to advocate student-learning capability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is cardinal and fundamental that teachers provide a framework for the course they will be teaching. Planning lessons is the result of a complex planning process that includes the yearly, term, and unit plans. A daily lesson plan is a written description of how students will move toward attaining specific objectives. It describes the teaching behaviour that will result in student learning (Sagrario, Al-Masri & Perez, 2014). In contemporary social learning theories, learning is not configured as the sedimentation of knowledge and skills, but rather the acquisition of activities that allow for legitimate entry into a community of practice, through which an identity is gained. We acknowledge the importance of character formation as a 'professional' and of identity construction as 'diagnostician' as well as 'inter-professional team worker' (Bleakley, 2012). The lesson planning process is of vital importance for the successful development of the class (Salaberri & Sánchez, 2012). A handful of teachers enter a classroom without some kind of plan. Lesson plans are systematic records of a teacher's thoughts about what will be covered during a lesson. Richards (1998) suggests that lesson plans help the teacher think about the lesson in advance to "resolve problems and difficulties, to provide a structure for a lesson, to provide a 'map' for the teacher to follow, and to provide a record of what has been taught" (p.103). There are also internal and external reasons for planning lessons (McCutcheon, 1980). Teachers plan for internal reasons in order to feel more confident, to learn the subject matter better, to enable lessons to run more smoothly, and to anticipate problems before they happen. Teachers plan for external reasons in order to satisfy the expectations of the education authorities, programme requirements or principal and to guide a substitute teacher in case the class needs one.

Marshall et al. (2007) traced curriculum origins to its Latin roots which mean 'race course'. Indeed, in many ways the curriculum is very similar to a race where there are a series of obstacles that need to be achieved in order to gain a qualification. The importance of scheme of work is to design it to make the teaching of my subject more manageable over a period of time. Planning can be regarded as a process of transformation during which the teacher creates ideas for a lesson based on understanding of learners' needs, problems, and interests, and based on the content of the lesson itself. Thereupon, this does not necessarily result in a detailed, written lesson plan. Many teachers teach successful lessons based on mental plans or on brief lesson notes. To boot that, what is crucial is not the extent and detail of the teacher's plan but the extent to which the teacher has developed ideas to pirouette a potential lesson (such as a textbook lesson) into the basis for an engaging and effective lesson (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Lesson planning involves decisions about the pedagogical dimensions of the lesson, which can be called syllabus, scheme of work or even a more contemporary and comprehensive term module information booklet. Whence, another important aspect of a lesson concerns the management of learners during the lesson. This includes eliciting students' attention, maintaining their engagement in the lesson, and organizing them into pairs or groups. If these aspects of a lesson are not well handled by a teacher, much of the time available for teaching can be lost in non-productive activity. Farrell (2002) discusses the processes involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a lesson. At the planning stage, teachers need to think about questions such as what the objective(s) of the lesson will be, what materials and activities will be used, what

type of interaction will be encouraged, and how the learning will be monitored. Hence, the processes of curriculum development and syllabus design in teaching usually involve evaluating the needs of learners, developing goals and objectives, planning a syllabus, selecting teaching approaches and materials, and deciding on assessment procedures and criteria.

In addition, Matejkab and Kurke (1994) suggest four identified major uses of a syllabus: (1) a contract between the instructor and the students, (2) a communication device that would connect the instructor to the students, (3) an instructional plan for the instructor and (4) a cognitive map for the students. Bers et al. (1996) have focused on accountability, emphasizing the use of the syllabus as an administrative tool for the documentation of teaching effectiveness, which could therefore provide evidence for the accreditation of an institution or the performance evaluation of its instructors. Finally, Cullen and Harris (2009) claimed that the syllabus might gauge the mind-set of the instructor, assessing whether the instructor was influenced by an instructional or a learner-centered paradigm.

Predominantly, a learning-centered syllabus will provide information on how to plan for the tasks and experiences of the semester, how to evaluate and monitor performance, and how to allocate time and resources to areas in which more learning is essential. This information can help students develop self-management skills that are valuable beyond the demands of a particular course. When the students are familiar with the objectives and learning outcomes of the modules taught, the lecturer may find it user oriented while imparting the knowledge. This will enable the students to understand the application of each module to their job requirements and scope in future (Iqbal & Thurasingam, 2014). On that account, the syllabus apart from being a contract between the lecturer and student also communicates much about the lecturers' attitudes toward students and learning. The way in which the engagement takes place helps students to understand whether the atmosphere of the class will be in a formal or informal manner, wherein it may acquaint the students with the logistics of the course. It is discernible that a comprehensive syllabus can detail this information so that students will apperceive their expectations and can be adapted and well-groomed for each class meeting.

METHODOLOGY

This research is designed to investigate student awareness in utilizing course syllabus information booklet. The preparation and the designation of course syllabus may be different among other private higher institutions. However the main contents such as learning objectives, learning outcomes, subject contents and assessment due dates are crucial information to be interpolated (Parkes & Harris, 2002). In addition, a contract between the lecturer and the students, an instructional plan for the students and a cognitive map for the students are important to ensure the students are fully equipped with a proper academic guide. In tandem with, the university's mission for life-long learning, the academics need to reverberate on the learning preparations and students' understanding of the modules. Therefore, the following model framework was derived based on the research.

The diagram 1 is a simple chronology of student's lesson plan flow chart. It is constructed based on the three components of the study namely information gathered from the course syllabus by the learners, the level of understanding of the learning outcome and learning objectives as well as the level of application of the components of the course

syllabus to their course of study. The initial setting-up and information delivery by the lecturers have enabled the students to set a level of preparedness of the module concerned as the students have acquired pertinent insights of the topics, learning outcome, relevant activities, assessments and specific deadlines. Easy accessibility and clear information will conjure better understanding of the module activities. This will assist the students in prioritised the information acquired to organize and gear up for the module. Hence, it will escalate the students' capability in the application of the contents of the module to ameliorate a taxonomic learning process. This has been discoursed further in the analysis below (Iqbal & Thuraisingam, 2014b)¹.

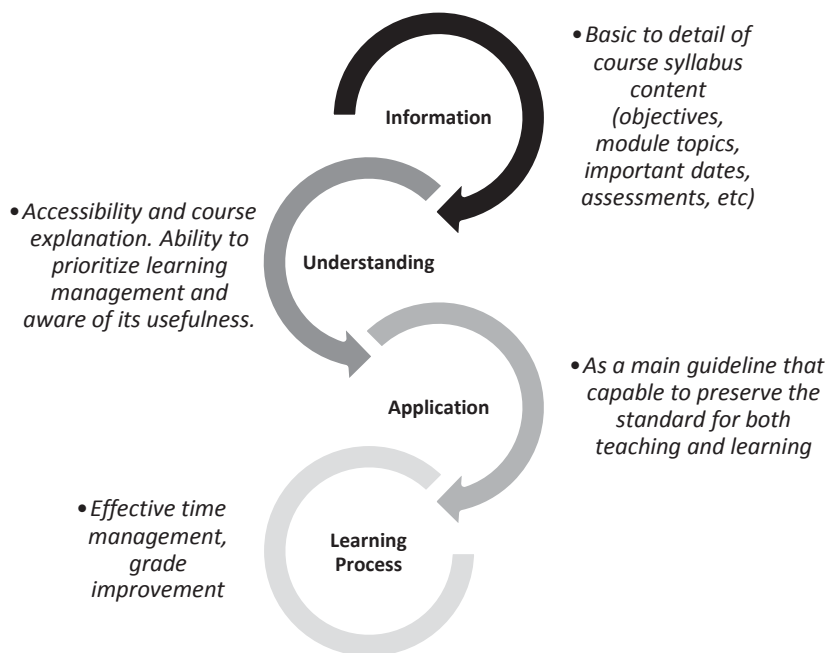


Diagram 1: Students Lesson Plan Flow Chart. Adaptable from Hammon and Shock (1994)

¹ The research framework has utilized course syllabus framework in assuming the similarity concepts of utilization for general syllabus contents. This generalization was similar to (Matejkab & Kurke, 1994).

Data and Procedure

In order to conduct this study, five private tertiary institutions in Klang Valley were selected based on availability, accessibility and status (University College to University). Syllabus physical comparisons were made prior to the collection of the data, in order to identify the common information and differences between practices. It has been identified that all these five institutions has similar information pertaining to its three course syllabus elements (general information, course syllabus information and university policy information). In setting on this study, the survey strategy whereby questionnaires were shared among selected private institution to gather quantitative data on the participants' perceptions and other information related to the objectives of study. The sample based on 500 first year undergraduate students and the respondents for this study were selected through a convenience sampling.

The questionnaire consists of three parts. (1) Information of the syllabus; (2) Discussion and awareness of syllabus; and (3) The application of course syllabus in learning process. Beginning of data collection, 20 samples of pilot test were conducted. This study has demonstrated descriptive analysis to highlight the awareness level in utilizing the course syllabus to determine the level of student preparedness. In addition, mean and standard deviation is use to observe the behavioural of the data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The course syllabus evolution, which has taken place from simple course outline to meticulous and student-centered learning approach, is somewhat surprisingly that little evidence in evaluating the usefulness. Hence, below finding is focus on measuring the usability and usefulness on course syllabus information in student's learning process which include time management, preparation and course topics.

Table 1: Frequency of Respondents based on Academic Discipline and Semester

Academic Discipline			First Year		Total
			First Semester	Second Semester	
Sciences	Gender	Male	48	24	72
		Female	53	19	72
	Total		101	43	144
Social Sciences	Gender	Male	80	75	155
		Female	67	72	139
	Total		147	147	294
Humanities	Gender	Male	9	12	21
		Female	15	26	41
	Total		24	38	62
Total	Gender	Male	137	111	248
		Female	135	117	252
	Total		272	228	500

The research setting was a small-sized sample of 500 first year students from five private tertiary institutions in Klang Valley. There were 49.6% of male and 50.4% of female respondents from three different academic disciplines (humanities, social sciences and natural sciences). Individual university's faculty handbook and academic charter may know have single course syllabi standard. This decision had been left to the specific college, school, or department to regulate. However, as it was mentioned earlier, any piece of documented information pertaining to contact information, syllabus contents and module assessment can be consider as course syllabus. The survey questionnaire measured respondents view on the depth of syllabus information, discussion, awareness and finally application.

Prior questionnaire distribution, 20 samples of pilot study were conducted in small scare as preliminary study in order to evaluate feasibility, cost and time efficiency, as well to improve the study design prior to full-scale research approach. Reliability test of Cronbach alpha has been reported in Table 2, which has showed that all measurement in questionnaires, indicate excellent in terms of internal consistency (reliability).

Table 2: Pilot Test for Reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Syllabus Information	0.819	7
Syllabus Discussion	0.874	10
Syllabus Awareness	0.911	10
Syllabus Application	0.947	10

Table 3: Mean, Rating and Standard Deviation for Syllabus Information

	Mean	Rating (%)	Standard Deviation
Learning Objectives are stated	2.722	3.00 (72.2)	0.448
Learning Outcomes are stated	2.790	3.00 (79.0)	0.408
All topics in syllabus are stated	2.676	3.00 (67.6)	0.468
Assessments are stated	2.764	3.00 (77.0)	0.439
All activities are stated	2.566	3.00 (59.8)	0.557
All deadlines are stated	2.668	3.00 (68.4)	0.504
Instructions on activities are stated	2.590	3.00 (62.6)	0.561

**Rating 1 (Brief), 2 (Average) and 3 (Detailed)*

Table 3 illustrates the depth of information inserted in as a proper guidance throughout the semester. More than 65% of the respondents agreed that the provided information is detailed and sufficiently informative. These includes learning objectives, learning outcomes and number or type of assessment which has higher percentage as compare to list of activities and activities instructions information which are 60% and 62% respectively. This may reflect that the syllabus preparation in various institution seems to be aligned with (Matejkab & Kurke, 1994) which has suggested four important components in syllabus namely, learning objectives, learning outcomes, subject contents and assignment due date. Meanwhile, other components may not be crucial. In minor, Fox (2011) mentioned that most

faculty do not regularly tie the assignment described to the learning outcomes or provide complete information on ‘why, what and how’ assignment should be done. One of the possible reason that faculty may think that the available information is obvious to students and assume students see how it relates to what they will be doing.

Table 4: Mean, Mode (Percentage) and Standard Deviation for Syllabus Discussion

	Mean	Rating/ Percentage (%)				SD
		1-2	3	4	5	
Lecturer has explained Learning Objectives clearly	3.278	14.4	30.2	55.4	0	1.009
Lecturer has explained Learning Outcomes clearly	3.872	1.8	24.6	57.6	16.0	0.702
Lecturer has explained all the topics that going to be teach	3.736	11.4	27.8	36.6	24.2	0.953
Lecturer has highlighted all type of assessments	3.990	5.0	16.6	52.8	25.6	0.789
Lecturer has informed all activities that going to be execute	3.810	5.0	30.6	41.0	23.4	0.892
Lecturer has informed all assessments dateline	3.698	11.0	29.8	37.6	21.6	0.930
Lecturer has instructed the students to refer the course syllabus booklet before class	3.914	1.0	28.2	49.2	21.6	0.729
Lecturer has reminded the students to refer the course syllabus booklet after class	3.728	4.8	35.2	42.4	17.6	0.805
Lecturer has followed the topics as listed in course syllabus	3.882	2.8	26.8	49.8	20.6	0.757
Lecturer made pre-learning information is useful	3.766	8.0	27.0	45.4	19.6	0.856

**Rating 1 (Strongly disagree) – 5 (Strongly agree)*

As displayed in table 4, majority of the respondents rated ‘4’ for course syllabus discussion. The percentages rating from ‘agree’ to ‘strongly agree’ are around 50% to 70% that lecturer set some effort to discuss on course syllabus. This result may be reflecting on the traditional culture in first day of class practices. However, the percentage of discussion perceived differently between institutions. There are few components that slightly significant to be less highlighted in discussion, such as explanation of learning objectives, explanation of all topics that going to be taught, and reminding students to refer course syllabus after class which each of these components has more than 40% (combination percentage of rating 1 to 3). Moore and Gayle (2010) have highlighted some challenges in an integration of full understanding of information in learning syllabus, but Olson (2009) indicated that syllabus outcomes could be the be useful litmus test for pedagogical practices.

Table 5: Mean, Mode (Percentage) and Standard Deviation for Syllabus Awareness

	Mean	Rating/Percentage (%)				SD
		1-2	3	4	5	
I am well aware of the Learning Objectives	3.818	3.0	30.0	49.2	17.8	0.752
I am well aware of the Learning Outcomes	3.806	2.2	33.0	46.8	18.0	0.749
I am well informed with all the topics	3.818	6.2	26.6	46.4	20.8	0.831
I am well informed with the assessments	3.854	2.8	27.0	52.2	18.0	0.736
I am well informed with all activities	4.028	9.2	0	69.6	21.2	0.762
I am well informed with all deadlines	3.972	1.0	24.0	51.8	23.2	0.716
I can make early preparation before class	3.738	4.8	32.8	46.2	16.2	0.784
I can keep track for the next preparation	3.828	2.4	33.6	42.8	21.2	0.785
I can keep track on the topics in syllabus	3.700	8.4	29.0	46.8	15.8	0.834
I can improve my learning and time management	3.726	2.0	38.2	45.0	14.8	0.732

In table 5, although more than 60% of the respondents are able to understand both learning objectives and outcomes, however, majority of the user are enlightened, have perspicuously understood with the list of the topics, and are able to conform to available assessments and deadlines. While the majority of 59% agreed that the course syllabus helped them in their learning process, but up to 41% of respondents still being uncertain. One could be the reason is that students spend lesser time to understand and appreciate the designed syllabus contract prior to class. Most frequently students only looked at the selective information and it was done prior to or close time to class (Calhoun & Becker, 2008). Nevertheless, the overall finding seems to be significant whereby, they strongly agree that comprehensive information in single booklet helps in their learning process.

Additionally, partial of unexplained percentage could be explained by other tools, which may help in learning process such as technology, environment, and space of the classroom (Ceppi & Zini 1998; Jamieson, 2003; Norton, 2009; Morgan, 2011). This finding may suggest majority of respondents who have utilised course syllabus information are well informed and aware that well informative course syllabus information may help them in various learning plan and preparation. On top of that, the information is standardized guidance that will be use throughout their course.

Table 6: Mean, Mode (Percentage) and Standard Deviation for Syllabus Application

	Mean	Rating/ Percentage (%)				SD
		1-2	3	4	5	
I can relate the topic and the learning objectives	3.812	3.0	30.0	49.2	17.8	0.750
I can relate the topic and the learning outcomes	3.806	2.2	33.0	46.8	18.0	0.749
I always refer to my course syllabus for class topics	3.826	6.2	26.6	46.4	20.8	0.803
I always refer to my course syllabus for assessments	3.854	2.8	27.0	52.2	18.0	0.736
I always prepare for activities	3.892	9.2		69.6	21.2	0.776
I always submit all assessments on time	3.972	1.0	24.0	51.8	23.2	0.716
I make effort to study before class	3.776	4.8	32.8	46.2	16.2	0.779
I make preparation for the next class	3.760	2.4	33.6	42.8	21.2	0.790
I always ensure all the topic is covered in the course	3.700	8.4	29.0	46.8	15.8	0.834
I feel my learning is more systematic and optimum	3.770	2.0	38.2	45.0	14.8	0.734

Table 6 indicates measurement on how far respondents agree that course syllabus information able to develop systematic learning process throughout semester. In correspond to their understanding perception rating in table 5.0, through sharing, explanation and understanding of learning objectives and outcomes, 68% of the respondents able to relate the purposes and the aims of each topic that they learnt. More than 60% have agreed that they will refer to course syllabus for class topics preparation, assessments guidance and deadlines, as well as other activities. This may encourage check balanced in teaching and learning process. Aside from to ensure all syllabi are fully covered, 59% of students believe that their learning journey could be well planned, systematic and optimum. Weimer (2016) stated that proper course syllabus information may not only avoid the disconnection between the stated learning goals for the course but also able to recapitulate the holistic process in teaching and learning which both educators and learners are well informed with expectation and direction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The research study covered and measure five areas: syllabus purpose, syllabus components, syllabus discussion and awareness, and syllabus application or use. This article is focused on the syllabus awareness and to what degree they consider this course syllabus information are essential or useful.

Some of the syllabi purposes are more specific to certain users and syllabi can have more than one purpose or function. However, the most basic purpose is as a communication tools or mechanism. Ever since, the learning pedagogy has evolved from teachers-centered

to students-centered learning, the dissemination of information should be well informative. Subsequently, the main idea or point in this information sharing is thus a communication mechanism so for more specific purposes such as a planning tool or course plan. A factor that Thompson (2007) mentions is how instructors try to balance their caring and nurturing side for the student with the need to be focused on teaching and the student learning and how to communicate those two mind-sets carefully in a syllabus. The author also explained how these different users have conflicting perspectives. Part of this research study asked user (learner or students in this context) to identify their level of awareness and how this may essential to help in their learning process.

Though documented course syllabus, along with clear discussion on the first day of class, it seems elevated students understanding on expectation and create clear awareness on the topics they will going to learn, assessments they are going to attempt, along with the deadlines and module activities that they are going to prepare. This notion of balancing educator's caring side to assist students', may suggest greater assistance in students' learning experience (Thompson, 2007). In addition, this may further built trust between educators and learners to fulfil the duty and to achieve expectation throughout the semester.

Besides that, educators indicated the syllabus as a course plan for students to be useful and probably the one purpose that all syllabi users (students, instructors, administrators and accreditation organizations) would have relatively the same level of interest but for different reasons. Students want to know what the assignments will be, the submission date as well as activities that going to be conducted. If students are aware of what is happening in the class or going to be happened in the next class, it makes not only educator's job much easier but students able to participate fully in designed module.

As for future practices or on going improvement, perhaps educators should review and consider the multiple purposes the syllabus document can fill and which purposes would best help them in the teaching approach and learning experience for the students. Even though, commonly agree that syllabi are for communication purpose but how might the document change in the educators consider the document as an example to enhance systematic learning experience. The document might include more teaching tools and resources for the students or sound more enthusiastic about the course content to help excite the students.

Part of this process for educators is reflecting on what assumptions they have about the course content, about themselves as instructors, as well as assumptions about students. These assumptions will have an impact on the syllabus (Lowther, Stark, & Martens, 1989) and the content that they communicate and how they communicate it. Instructors need to understanding or remember that what they think students want to know from a syllabus and what students actually want to know from a syllabus might not be the same. Studies (Garavalia, Hummel, Wiley & Huitt, 1999; McDonald et al., 2010) have indicated that typically the information that instructors consider the most important is not the same information that students do.

Discussion of course syllabus information seems to play significant role to further enhance students' awareness on its importance. As suggested by Fox (2011), a) clear learning outcomes during class discussion are the foundation of a learning-centered syllabus and a basic tenet of all instructional design; b) link assignment descriptions and learning outcomes could enhance students' interest and the learning will be more meaningful; and c)

is to establish relevance at the start of every class period on what they going to learn, why they have to learn and how they going to address the situation. All this information can be inserted in course syllabus as reference to students from time to time.

Stanny, Gonzalez and McGowan (2015) highlighted that almost every instructor create syllabi without direct oversight or subsequent evaluation. However, they observed that course syllabi are ‘unobstructive’ but powerful indicators of what takes place in classrooms. It can be also used as classroom management tool to set certain regulation for common problems such as class disruptions, disrespect, cheating, etc.

Harnish and Bridges (2011) highlighted that ‘tone’ as much as content does matter to provide different perception of students. Their finding revealed that syllabus that written in a friendly tone had significant impact on instructors’ perceptions. Student perceptions of faculty using a learner-centered syllabus were markedly more positive; they rated faculty as creative, caring, happy, receptive, reliable and enthusiastic as well as having more student engagement in their class than faculty using a teacher-centered syllabus. Besides that, they suggested to downside ‘unimportant’ policies which plethora of prohibitions dampen the motivation to learn. They also emphasized that the contract syllabus makes clear what the student is obligated to provide. This may suggest for course syllabus to be utilised like a ‘map’ and less like a contract.

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