



Research Article

Tone and style in pharmacy course syllabi

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Syllabi are a part of the teaching and learning experience in pharmacy curricula. Yet, little has been done to understand the effects of these documents. Studies in Psychology and Social Work report important effects of style and tone of syllabi on student perceptions and performance. We sought to describe a cross-sectional pattern in the tone and style of pharmacy course syllabi.

Methods: We retrieved syllabi via US pharmacy institutions and association website searches. The tone was characterized as “warm” or “cold” based on the publications in Psychology and Social Work higher education. QSR NVivo® software was used to code syllabi. Subsequently, categories of style and tone were quantified in a descriptive manner.

Results: We retrieved 416 pharmacy course syllabi from 30 public universities (69.8%) and 13 private universities (30.2%) across curricular disciplines. After observing saturation where no new patterns arose, 141 syllabi were analyzed.

Conclusions: Pharmacy course syllabi were rarely warm in tone and did not fully employ the components of the syllabus as a potential learning tool. This may have important implications on student-teacher interactions, professional development, and student perceptions and academic performance. More work should be done to determine whether and in what manner style and tone may affect pharmacy student learning and engagement.

Introduction

Course syllabi are a part of the teaching and learning experience in pharmacy curricula. Researchers have reached a general consensus regarding the intended purpose of course syllabi and what components are necessary to include in a syllabus (Fig. 1).^{1–4} Parkes et al.² summarize the various functions of course syllabi well into three roles: permanent record, contract, and learning tool. According to these functions, the syllabus has a two-fold purpose. One is keeping record of class content and policies both in and out of the classroom. The other is to establish expectations for both students and professors in order to optimize student success. Aligning with these functions, course syllabi generally include identifying course information, required texts and materials, course goals and objectives, grading procedures, and other course policies.

In more recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on policies and rules in the syllabus.^{6–8} Peer et al.⁸ describes the need for course syllabi to “facilitate learning.” That is, to “communicate the essence of a course” rather than solely the logistics of a course. Additionally, they describe how the syllabus can be used as a tool to encourage students to take an active role in the learning process. Syllabi that assume the role of a learning tool may include additional components such as an explanation of the relevance of the course, tips/study strategies, information on how to reach out to the instructor for help, and other university resources available to students.^{1,2,5,6} The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education 2016 Standards simply state, in section 10.12, that course syllabi

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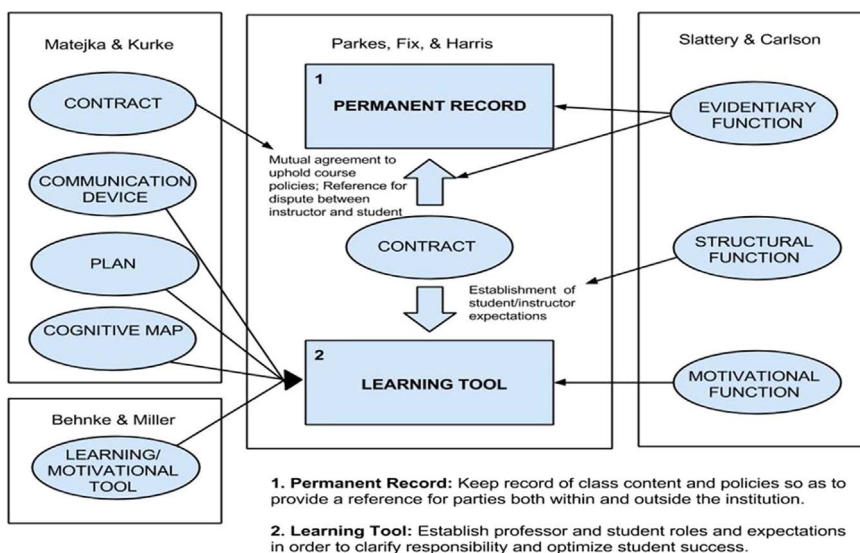


Fig. 1. Illustration of roles of course syllabi.

should be “developed and updated through a faculty-approved process, contain information that supports curricular quality assurance assessment.” It does not lay out explicit content, nor does it prescribe as a model any particular style or tone.

Most research regarding the effects of course syllabi focuses on how variations in tone and style of syllabi affect student perceptions of both the instructor and the course. A study by Perrine et al.⁹ found that including supportive statements in course syllabi increased student's willingness to seek help from the instructor. Saville¹⁰ determined that a more detailed syllabus positively affected student perceptions of teacher effectiveness and that students were more likely to recommend an instructor and take another course from the same instructor with a more detailed syllabus. Harnish et al.¹¹ examined how a friendly versus unfriendly tone affected student perceptions of the course instructor and found that students perceived the instructor as warmer, more approachable, and more motivated to teach a course when the course syllabus had a friendly tone. In addition, students were more likely to perceive the overall course as more difficult when the syllabus was written in an unfriendly tone. A separate study examined how the framing of a grading system in syllabi affected student perceptions of the course. This study found that students reported greater motivation and enjoyment and forecasted a higher grade in the course when the grading system was framed in terms of gains instead of losses.¹²

In addition to examining effects of course syllabi on student perceptions, researchers have also looked at how syllabi can affect student performance. A study by Serafin et al.¹³ reported that students in a course with a more explicit syllabus regarding objectives, contents, learning activities, instructional resources, and evaluation criteria earned higher grades. Effects were examined to determine the mean exam performance. Researchers found that the mean course performance of students was lower when the syllabus framed the grading system in terms of losses.¹²

Findings from the studies listed above support adoption of a friendly tone, inclusion of supportive statements, positive outlook, and incorporation of sufficient detail regarding objectives, learning activities, instructional resources, and evaluation criteria.^{9,10,12,13} It is also apparent that limited research has been conducted to examine the tone and style of existing syllabi currently in use in teaching. Therefore, there is a need to analyze the tone and style of existing syllabi in order to determine if existing course syllabi are in accordance with the practices that have been found to optimize student learning and success.

Methods

Search and retrieval

Pharmacy course syllabi were obtained through the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy website via the Social Administrative Sciences webpage. Additional syllabi were publicly available and retrieved on school of pharmacy webpages through a Google search using the search terms “pharmacy course syllabus” and “pharmacy course syllabi.” All searches were performed and syllabi retrieved during the Spring of 2014.

Course syllabi were included for analysis solely on the basis that they were used in pharmacy course curricula by a school of pharmacy. This included syllabi from core curricula courses, electives, and PhD pharmacology courses. Portions of the documents collected that were excluded from analysis included table of contents, appendices, and material lists. In addition, if a schedule of classes was stand-alone outside of a course syllabus rather than embedded into the course syllabus, it was excluded from analysis. However, schedules that were part of the course syllabus were included in the analysis and coded.

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