

Syllabus Checklist to Support Student Belonging and Achievement



Organized by Pedagogical Principles

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Overview

The checklists in this document are organized by **pedagogical principles**. If you would prefer to view them organized by **syllabus section**, download this [version](#).

This syllabus checklist serves as a guide for constructing and revising course design, assessments, teaching practices, and policies, with many principles extending to other course communication tools.

The checklist is organized by three pedagogical principles that underlie effective, evidence-based course design and teaching practices (see *page 4* for a description of each principle):

- » **Transparency & Purpose**
- » **Structured Support**
- » **Community & Belonging**

This organization may be most useful if you want to delve deeper into the rationale and evidence behind these teaching and course design practices by understanding the overarching pedagogical principles they support. You may also recognize additional teaching practices that support these principles (e.g., how you plan a class session or communicate on an LMS or in class). Each of these sections also divides up practices based on the syllabus section where they are likely to show up:

- » **Learning outcomes and assessments** include the course description, learning objectives or outcomes, as well as the descriptions of the various assessments (exams, homework, projects, and papers).
- » **Class activities / participation** includes descriptions of what will occur during the class sessions, including how students will engage with the course concepts/skills and with other students during class activities.
- » **Course Policies** include guidelines for class attendance, participation, collaboration, accommodations, academic integrity, and the use of generative AI, among others.
- » **Student-instructor interactions** include descriptions of how students will interact with instructor(s) in class/lab/recitations, in office hours, and in other opportunities for students to get help outside of class and lab sessions.
- » **Throughout syllabus** highlights characteristics of syllabi that are likely to occur in multiple and/or varied sections of the syllabus. For example, the syllabus may include a description of how coursework is relevant in career and life contexts in the course description, the assessments, class activities, and/or collaboration policies.

Pedagogical Principles



Transparency & Purpose

Transparency involves clearly communicating why students are learning course concepts and skills and how you designed the activities and assessments to help them learn. Many academic contexts are guided by a “hidden curriculum” of unspoken norms and tacit expectations that inform how students navigate courses as well as interactions with their peers and instructors (Jackson, 1968; Gable, 2021; Rabah, 2012). Clear communication of norms and expectations is one way to make the “hidden curriculum” visible, which can be particularly helpful for those who lack the academic background or social capital to inform them, implicitly, of how to navigate academic contexts and succeed in their coursework.

Communicating the purpose of learning is a critical component of transparency. Students can see the value in their coursework when instructors communicate how particular activities and assignments come together to help them achieve the learning outcomes and build crucial skills for future classes or careers (Canning & Harackiewicz, 2015; Harackiewicz et al., 2016).



Structured Support

Structured support describes a systemic approach to designing assessments and learning activities that guide students through targeted practice with key concepts and skills (e.g., active learning). It also describes strategies that support equitable opportunities for students to participate and interact in the classroom.

Student achievement increases with more class structure, particularly for students whose identities have been historically excluded and underserved in higher education (Theobald et al., 2020). In more structured courses, students spend more time preparing for class and feel a greater sense of community in the classroom (Eddy & Hogan, 2014) than they do in less structured courses.



Community & Belonging

Academic belonging refers to students’ sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom as well as their sense of connection to the discipline (Rainey et al., 2018).

The syllabus can support a sense of belonging by highlighting the relevance of the coursework and by communicating opportunities for students to build relationships with peers and with the instructor(s) and teaching staff. When students feel that they belong in an academic context, they are more likely to show up for class, engage with classmates and instructors (Wilson et al., 2014; Zumbrunn et al., 2015), feel academic confidence, and be motivated to persist in challenging learning tasks (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

The checklist is adapted from a rubric by the Teaching + Learning Lab, grounded in research on STEM education, learning sciences, and higher education, and informed by the University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching framework. For more information about the important role of the syllabus and existing scholarly research, visit [Syllabus Checklist to Support Student Belonging & Achievement](#).

Additional Resources:

1. [Equity-Focused Teaching](#) | Center for Research on Learning & Teaching at U-M (CRLT)
2. [Transparent Assignment Design Template for Teachers](#) | TILT Higher Ed
3. [Checklist* for Designing Transparent Assignments](#) | TILT Higher Ed

If you have any questions or concerns about the checklist or how to implement these practices in your syllabus, the Teaching + Learning Lab staff are happy to help. Please reach out to us at tll@mit.edu to set up a meeting.



Checklists

Note: You do not need to check off every box to develop an effective syllabus; consider your disciplinary and individual priorities, pedagogical values, and teaching contexts to determine the incremental changes to make to your syllabi this semester.

Transparency & Purpose

Learning outcomes and assessments

A transparent and purposeful syllabus...

- Defines [specific, measurable learning goals](#) for the course
- Describes what students will do to complete major assessments
- Explains the purpose of major assessments, referring to discipline-relevant knowledge and skills
- Articulates how assessments will be graded with criteria, [rubrics](#), or exemplars
- Includes tips and concrete strategies on how to succeed in the course, which may include external tools and campus resources (Note: these may be embedded throughout the syllabus or in the assessment descriptions)

Examples: <https://bit.ly/3DKHjx6>

Class activities and participation

A transparent and purposeful syllabus...

- Clearly and concretely explains typical class sessions and how/if students are expected to participate in class activities
- Clearly explains why participation is important (if participation is expected), linking participation with successful learning of ILOs and/or its relevance as a disciplinary skill

Examples: <https://bit.ly/4htKalw>

Course policies

A transparent and purposeful syllabus...

- Provides clear and detailed policies
- Clearly explains the rationale for all course policies (e.g., late work, attendance, generative AI, collaboration, academic integrity, etc.).
- Explains how policies are designed to support student learning, as relevant.
- Proactively invites student requests for accommodations

Examples: <https://bit.ly/41WAUZ3>

Student-instructor interactions

A transparent and purposeful syllabus...

- Explains how and when members of the teaching team are available to students
- Clearly describes how to contact instructors
- Articulates the purpose of office hours or other methods of reaching the teaching staff (e.g., piazza, slack)
- May give examples of when a student might want to visit office hours

Examples: <https://bit.ly/3XK4Wg0>

Structured Support

Learning outcomes and assessments* (note: these are course design considerations)

A syllabus that embeds structured support...

- Explains how assessments measure student knowledge and skills that are linked to learning outcomes (i.e., alignment)
- Employs [low-stakes class activities and/or assessments](#) that provide students with feedback on their own learning
- Embeds [opportunities to revise or improve on assessments](#), based on feedback
- Employs a variety of assessments that draw on different skills for students to showcase their learning
- Builds in opportunities for student choice in assessments (e.g., multiple options for topics or modalities for assignments, optional opportunities for instructor or peer feedback on drafts)

Examples: <https://bit.ly/41YFPsq>



Class activities and participation

A syllabus that embeds structured support...

- Describes guided activities that help students prepare for class (e.g., guided reading questions, preparatory homework)
- Describes multiple, specific ways that students can participate in class (e.g., paired and large group discussions, polling, etc.)
- Describes class activities that allow students to practice with concepts and skills that align with learning outcomes and/or assessments
- Provides opportunities for students to reflect on the value of their work with other students, particularly if collaboration is expected

Examples: <https://bit.ly/4kNrwyf>



Course policies

A syllabus that embeds structured support...

- Provides clear and detailed information on exceptions to course policies (e.g., missing class, turning in work late, etc.)
- Describes how to communicate with the instructor or steps to take if students need to secure exceptions (e.g., missing class, turning in work late, etc.)
- Articulates plans for flexibility for assessments if unforeseen circumstances arise (e.g., drop one homework score, makeup oral exam, replace exam score with average, etc.)
- Proactively invites students to request accommodations
- Links to campus resources that provide additional support for students

Examples: <https://bit.ly/3FCVcxS>



Student-instructor interactions

A syllabus that embeds structured support...

- Describes specific and easily accessible opportunities for students to interact with instructor(s) beyond office hours (e.g., after class, Slack, Piazza)

Examples: <https://bit.ly/4iK9HhN>

Community & Belonging



Learning outcomes and assessments.

A syllabus that supports community and belonging...

- Highlights relevance of coursework to career and life-oriented contexts

Examples: <https://bit.ly/41MKmgg>



Class activities and participation

A syllabus that supports community and belonging...

- Describes opportunities for students to interact as peers and/or identify shared interests in subject content

- Describes learning activities and/or assessments in which students collaborate

- Acknowledges the value of students learning from one another`

Examples: <https://bit.ly/3DKMWeI>



Student-instructor interactions

A syllabus that supports community and belonging...

- Encourages and invites students to engage with instructor(s)

Examples: <https://bit.ly/4hvzB7Q>



Throughout syllabus

A syllabus that supports community and belonging...

- Highlights relevance of coursework to career and life-oriented contexts

- Explicitly acknowledges and affirms students' different identities, experiences, strengths, and needs

- Explicitly acknowledges and affirms the value of considering and/or sharing different viewpoints

- Describes diversity as an asset in the classroom

- Articulates that they will be responsive by seeking and [addressing feedback](#) from students on their learning experiences and needs

Examples: <https://bit.ly/4iiP7Fs>

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