Teaching + Learning Lab

Syllabus Checklist to Support Student Belonging and Achievement

Organized by Syllabus Sections

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Contents

Overview

For instructors, developing a syllabus involves key decisions about course priorities, sequencing, assessments, policies, and contingency planning. It also plays a critical role in shaping students' first impressions of a course, the instructor, and their likelihood of success.

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 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.

Syllabus Sections

*The checklists in this document are organized by **syllabus section**. If you would prefer to view them organized by their underlying pedagogical principles, download this version.*

This organization of the checklist provides a streamlined approach to evaluating where to focus revision efforts with the ability to go section-by-section during revision.

1. **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).
2. **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.
3. **Course Policies** include guidelines for class attendance, participation, collaboration, accommodations, academic integrity, and the use of generative AI, among others.
4. **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.
5. **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

To Support Student Belonging & Achievement

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).

Each of the checklists on the following pages is labeled with an icon that denotes the pedagogical principles on which it is based:

Transparency & Purpose Structured Support Community & Belonging

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.*

Learning outcomes and course descriptions

- [ ] Highlights relevance of coursework to career and life-oriented contexts 
- [ ] Defines specific, measurable learning goals for the course 

Assessments

- [ ] Describes what students will do to complete major assessments 
- [ ] Explains how assessments measure student knowledge and skills that are linked to learning outcomes (i.e., alignment) 
- [ ] Explains the purpose of major assessments, referring to discipline-relevant knowledge and skills 
- [ ] Articulates how assessments will be graded with criteria, rubrics, or exemplars 
- [ ] 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) 
- [ ] 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:

 Transparency & Purpose: https://bit.ly/3DKHjx6

 Structured Support: https://bit.ly/41YFPsq

 Community & Belonging: https://bit.ly/41MKmgg

Class activities and participation

- [ ] Describes guided activities that help students prepare for class (e.g., guided reading questions, preparatory homework) 
- [ ] 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 intended learning outcomes and/or its relevance as a disciplinary skill 
- [ ] 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 
- [ ] 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 
- [ ] Provides opportunities for students to reflect on the value of their work with other students, particularly if collaboration is expected 

Examples:

 Transparency & Purpose: https://bit.ly/4htKaIw

 Structured Support: https://bit.ly/4kNrwyf

 Community & Belonging: https://bit.ly/3DKMWeI

Course policies

- [ ] 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
- [ ] 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.)
- [ ] 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.)
- [ ] Proactively invites students to request accommodations
- [ ] Links to campus resources that provide additional support for students

Examples:

Transparency & Purpose:	https://bit.ly/41WAUZ3
Structured Support:	https://bit.ly/3FCVcxS

Student-instructor Interactions (office hours, etc.)

- [ ] Explains how and when members of the teaching team are available to students
- [ ] Clearly describes how to contact instructors
- [ ] Encourages and invites students to engage with instructor(s)
- [ ] 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
- [ ] Describes specific and easily accessible opportunities for students to interact with instructor(s) beyond office hours (e.g., after class, Slack, Piazza)

Examples:

Transparency & Purpose:	https://bit.ly/3XK4Wg0
Structured Support:	https://bit.ly/4iK9HhN
Community & Belonging:	https://bit.ly/4hvzB7Q

Throughout syllabus

- [ ] 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
- [ ] Includes tips and concrete strategies on how to succeed in the course, which may include external tools and campus resources

Examples:

Transparency & Purpose:	https://bit.ly/3DKHjx6
Community & Belonging	https://bit.ly/4iiP7Fs

Resources

General

Equity-Focused Teaching | Center for Research on Learning & Teaching at U-M (CRLT)

Transparency & Purpose

Transparent Assignment Design Template for Teachers | TILT Higher Ed

Checklist* for Designing Transparent Assignments | TILT Higher Ed

Where to Start: Backward Design | TLL

How to Use Rubrics | TLL

Structured Support

Assess for Learning | TLL

How to Give Feedback | TLL

Community and Belonging

Mid-Semester Formative Feedback | TLL

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology

MIT Teaching + Learning Lab
Office of the Vice Chancellor
400 Main Street Room E19-611
Cambridge, MA 02142
tll@mit.edu