Empowering Emirati Tertiary Students: Does the Syllabus Improve Classroom Communication and Student Success?

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Abstract- The syllabus is a document instructors hand out and read out to students on the first day of class. While syllabi vary in form and content, they are intended to communicate course information and symbolic messages about the course and the instructor. They further act as a “legal document” and a “permanent class record”. Despite their significance, the academic literature on syllabi is scant and little exists about this academic practice, especially on what the syllabi actually mean to students. Once the first day of class is past, many questions come to mind in relation to the syllabus. Some of these questions include: what value do students continue to place in the syllabus document beyond the first class session? Does the document really matter to students throughout the term? How often do students use the document as they progress into the academic semester? And, does the syllabus have any effect upon classroom communication, student learning, and success? This study, therefore, used mixed methods to examine the extent to which Emirati tertiary students value, use, and learn from course syllabi in the course of their university education.

Keywords- Classroom communication, course syllabus, Emirati tertiary students, student learning, student success.

I. INTRODUCTION

Using a course syllabus to start class on the first day of a term has become an established tradition in higher education. Indeed, faculty use the syllabus to reach several explicit and implicit objectives [1]. In addition to being a conventional ice-breaker, faculty share a syllabus with students to communicate course information [2] and/or to send symbolic messages about the course and themselves [3], [4]. The syllabus may also be crafted to meet institutional requirements [5], or to serve as a binding document for students and faculty [6]. The emergence of legal language in syllabi also suggests that the document is increasingly considered as a permanent class record to be used in the case of student complaints or any other forms of litigations [7].

However, regardless of faculty intentions, the practice of handing out and reading out a syllabus on the first day of class may have become so systematic and routine that one needs to re-examine its didactic value. Consequently, it is essential to investigate the real worth of course syllabi particularly whether they improve classroom communication and help students in their learning and success.

Without a doubt, once the inaugural session of a term is past, several questions arise in relation to what the course syllabus actually represents to students. Some of these questions include: what value do students
continue to place in the syllabus document beyond the first class session? Does the document really matter to them throughout the term? How often do students use the document as they progress into the semester? And, does the course syllabus have any real effect upon classroom communication, student learning and success?

These questions and others become all the more important as most Emirati students are only introduced to the use of course syllabi when they start their tertiary education. Further, anecdotal evidence from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) higher education classrooms suggests that students may not be using their course syllabi as expected of them. For example, students frequently ask instructors throughout the term about information that is readily available to them in their course syllabi such as questions about homework and assignment details, exam requirements, assignment due dates, and basic course information like course section number, faculty office hours or faculty office location. Clearly, there is a need for empirical research in this area to derive an understanding of what Emirati tertiary students take away from the course syllabus. This is especially important as previous research on syllabi has concerned itself with Western students and Western university contexts.

This study therefore examined the extent to which tertiary students in a UAE university, value, use, and learn from course syllabi in the course of their education. This investigation is especially important as there is currently no empirical evidence on how the syllabus document is received and used by Emirati students. Findings should be useful to college professors in the UAE as they offer tangible information on issues such as how students perceive and value the syllabus as an educational tool, their pattern of use of the document, whether they derive any learning from the document, and whether they keep it at all beyond the first day of class. Recommendations from this study should be invaluable as they offer practical suggestions on what aspects do matter when faculty craft syllabi for Emirati university students.

II. METHOD

A. Research Design

The study used mixed methods in the process of data collection. The quantitative component of this research included the administration of a questionnaire specifically developed for the study to volunteer Emirati female university students pursuing their university education in a governmental higher education institution in the UAE. The qualitative part of the study included personal interviews with volunteer females from the same institution. The personal interviews served to secure additional information on dimensions of the problem not covered or considered in the questionnaire. Personal interviews also served to obtain detailed accounts based on the personal experience of the students in relation to course syllabi.

B. Participants

Questionnaire participants included 194 volunteer Emirati female university students recruited using a convenient sampling plan from an Emirati public university. Ninety-eight participants were first and second year students recruited from general education classes, and 96 respondents were major students recruited from third and fourth year classes.

Participants in the personal interview (N = 8) were recruited from the same institution using a judgmental sampling method. Criteria for inclusion included the variable university level. The sample included two students from each university level, that is two first-year, two second-year, two third-year, and two fourth-year students. Efforts were also made to include students from all available majors although the sample did not include students from the Academic Bridge Program (an English
language enhancement and proficiency program).

C. Instrument of Data Collection

The quantitative portion of the study was conducted using a questionnaire specifically developed for this study. During the Fall semester 2009, the investigator conducted a pilot study to calibrate the survey and to establish its content validity. The trial run was conducted on a convenient sample of 47 female students from the target university.

The personal interviews used a semi-structured format and used the same line of questions found in the questionnaire as a starting point, but participants were allowed to freely explore and discuss other issues not considered in the questionnaire.

D. Procedure

Questionnaire and personal interview participants were contacted through their university email address. The email informed students about the purpose of the research and asked for their consent to participate voluntarily in the study. All participants were provided with an informed consent and were ensured confidentiality of information. Participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw at any time from the study without penalty if they so choose.

E. Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS for Windows version 19. Personal interview data were treated at the qualitative level looking for similar patterns of responses and relevant common threads and themes in participants’ answers.

III. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Findings showed that, in general, there was an agreement among most participants on the importance and usefulness of the practice of receiving the syllabus document on the first day of class (N = 185; 95%). Questionnaire and personal interviews results showed that students found the practice very useful as it constitutes a smooth sort of “introduction”, “guide”, or “general orientation” to the course. Students noted that the syllabus clarifies the nature and scope of the course, outlines the course objectives, and provides information on the course timeline, the course requirements, the course textbook and reading assignments, and the course major assessment moments.

Participants found particularly useful the information relative to the assessment schedule (N = 190, 98%), some of the basic course information such as course delivery schedule (N = 181, 93%), and information relative to textbook and course material (N = 180, 93%). Instructor’s contact information was also considered valuable by the majority of respondents in this study (N = 178, 92%).

However, the rest of the information contained in the syllabus was not considered as important by most of the questionnaire participants. For instance, the instructor information such as the instructor’s name and affiliation was seen important only by 76 students (39%). Course information such as course number, section number, class meeting time and classroom number was valued by a handful of participating students only (N = 46, 24%). Policies and procedures contained in the syllabus were considered unimportant and useless (N = 16, 8%).

Personal interview comments essentially indicated that the reasons why students did not value these kind of information was because they felt it was not vital and had no significant bearing on their success or failure in the course. In a way, students thought that the information was good to know but not consequential if missed. The section on policies and procedures were regarded as the least useful as students get turned off by the formal and punitive nature of the section. Students also thought that this information appears in the university student handbook and in most syllabi they receive, therefore they do not consult it at all when they are handed the document.
Students, in general, did not regard the syllabus as a learning tool per se, and did not think that the document contributed directly to their learning (N = 164, 85%). However, personal interview responses suggested that students were very much aware of the strong and vital connection between the syllabus document and their performance and success in any given course. One student noted, that “if I do not know the exam date and what material to prepare, I doubt that I will do well in the course”. Another student suggested that “the syllabus is an essential document, it contains all the critical information needed to succeed in a course such as the course schedule, the required readings, deadlines and exam dates. Without this information no one can do well in any course”.

Results showed that only 43% of participating students keep the syllabus beyond the first day of class (N = 85). In addition, only 37% refer to the syllabus document every week throughout the semester (N = 72). Results further showed that Major students were the ones who tend to hang on to the syllabus (N = 68, 70% of major students) and use it on a weekly basis throughout the semester (N = 59, 61% of major students). Out of the general education students only 17 (17%) kept the syllabus document handy, and only 13 (13%) used it consistently on a weekly basis throughout the semester.

Personal interviews data suggested that general education students were not accustomed and socialized to the use of the syllabus document in high school and therefore they tended not to grasp the utility of the syllabus document immediately. However, they gradually notice its importance as they progress in their university studies. One student noted “at first, I only thought it was a document that teachers just gave us to tell us about their course. It took few semesters for me to realize that it is an important document that I should keep and follow throughout the semester”. Another student mentioned “I used to think that the document is useless as I can get the same information by asking the teacher. With time, I slowly learned that the only way to be organized, efficient and successful is by keeping all my course syllabi handy to consult them regularly”.

Participants considered the syllabus as a necessary course communication tool (N = 173, 89%). Personal interviews responses corroborated this result by further indicating that, if used properly, the syllabus enhances classroom communication because it clarifies for students what they are responsible for and when. It provides students with ample warning signals for difficult times of the semester so that they can manage their time and plan properly. One major student mentioned in the interview that “without the information communicated early on in the syllabus, students may not have a clue about the rough times of the semester and may not do well on projects, tests, and exams because they do not see it coming. Without the syllabus I will be so stressed and may not manage”.

Because of this, many students in the sample suggested that the syllabus has a lot to do with students’ success (N = 144, 74%). Interview data also suggested that students, especially those in the majors, see a direct connection between the syllabus and student success. Most participants in the interview mentioned that the syllabus works well for organized students who have the discipline to consult the document as often as possible to be in control and not to be taken by surprise. They recognized, however, that staying on top of things is not always possible as the semester usually gets tough regardless of their best efforts of keeping up with the syllabus. But essentially they recognized “that things can be a lot worse without the heads-up provided by the syllabus”. Participants were in agreement that the profile of a successful student inevitably includes those who keep in touch with course syllabi and use the information to plan efficiently to meet course requirements. One major student rightly
concluded that “you cannot be a good student if you do not keep the syllabus where you can see it”.

Further, many questionnaire participants (N = 118, 60%) think that the syllabus document is valuable as a learning aid. Most of those who thought so were students in the majors (N = 82, 85%). However, a smaller number of general education students had the same views (N = 62, 63%). The personal interviews data indicated that general education students, in general, do not see clearly the connection between the syllabus and academic success. For some of them, it is merely a document with a bunch of “overwhelming information” about the course.

This is precisely why most questionnaire respondents (N = 173, 89%) and interview participants (8, 100%) suggested the simplification of the syllabus document. The general direction of the qualitative results suggest that the majority of the students think that it would be best if the document was simpler, less technical, and less formal. Interview participants believed that the syllabus is more useful and will be more accessible and effective if it is shorter and contains only the necessary information. Interview participants, in general, disliked all sorts of redundant information which are typically found in all syllabi such as the sections on policies and procedures (including attendance policies, expected students’ behavior, code of conduct) and that of grading policy and grade structure. Students thought that these sections are best located in student handbooks to make room only for the essential information that have a bearing on student progress and academic success.

In general, students argued for a simple, short yet informative document that conveys vital information which should help students get organized and prepared to meet expected course requirements. Students suggested that the document should be written in a simple and accessible language to help the students understand and make sense of the information and make the most out of the document. Students especially argued against syllabi which are written in a sophisticated manner to impress rather than communicate the essential information about the course. Students’ opinions in general suggest that the document is intended for students therefore it should communicate, as succinctly as possible, all the necessary information about the course without any clutter. Useless and unhelpful information should be omitted so that the document is understood by all the students. One senior student strongly argued “the syllabus should be treated like an abstract where every word counts”.

IV. CONCLUSION

Most Emirati tertiary students first learn about the syllabus document upon joining the university. For most of them, the document has little meaning initially and therefore is wrongly perceived as having little or no value. This is especially the case as the value of using the syllabus for academic success is not properly explained to the students by anyone as suggested by most of the study participants. For the most part, students learn the hard way about the academic merits of the syllabus. Results suggest that students use the document more efficiently as they progress further in their university studies. Thus many students miss the benefits of this academic guide in their early university years. Results especially suggested that students, particularly those in the majors, recognize the communication power of the document and its connection with academic success. Nevertheless, many of argued for a shorter, simpler, less technical, and less formal document. Participants made the point that the document is intended for students and therefore it should be conceived that way.
REFERENCES


