The genre of syllabus in higher education

Elena Afros*, Catherine F. Schryer

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1

Abstract

This article examines the genre of syllabus in higher education. In particular, it focuses on the intertextuality and inter-discursivity of paper-based and web-mediated syllabi and the ways they are used to promote links between various academic — classroom and research — genres and discourse communities. The corpus consists of ten syllabi with different interactivity levels. To avoid discrepancy in content, only syllabi for introductory linguistics courses offered at several US universities have been selected. The study shows that the syllabus is not only a document, but also a site of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. It is also demonstrated that the syllabus is utilized by instructors both to manifest their membership in multiple discourse communities and to socialize students into (some of) them. Finally, it is suggested that even though the digital medium increases interactivity of the syllabus, web-mediated and paper-based syllabi can still be treated as instantiations of the same genre.
© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Syllabus; Academic writing; Genre; Interactivity; Higher education

1. Scope

Two major current developments in higher education — student centeredness and integration of technology into learning and teaching — have focused attention on the syllabus (see Collins, 1997; Creed, 1997; Grunert, 1997; Rankin, 2000). Generally conceived as ''a document by which faculty members define learning outcomes for students and the methods by which those outcomes will be realized'' (Habanek, 2005, p. 62), the syllabus has acquired significance as a tool that promotes links between classroom and research genres. Enhancement of these connections by means of the Internet has given rise to a new species — the web-mediated syllabus, which, according to researchers of digital documents (e.g. Askehave & Nielsen, 2005), should differ profoundly from its predecessor — the paper-based syllabus. In the present article, we test this hypothesis against syllabi with different levels of interactivity by comparing their structural and discursive features and assessing the impact of medium on their intertextuality and interdiscursivity. First, we provide a brief outline of the current research on the syllabus in the learner-centered environment and the potential benefits of digital medium for syllabus designers. Then, we undertake a detailed comparison between paper-based and web-mediated syllabi to locate the distinctions that can be attributed to the medium. The pedagogical implications of the present study and suggestions for future research conclude the paper.

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 519 888 4567x32579; fax: +1 519 746 5788.
E-mail addresses: eafros@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca (E. Afros), cschryer@watarts.uwaterloo.ca (C.F. Schryer).

2. Overview of current research

The syllabus is one of the most recognizable instantiations of academic genres. Together with other classroom genres, it "constitute[s] typified and situated topoi within which students and teacher recognize and enact their situated practices, relations, and subjectivities" (Bawarshi, 2003, pp. 118–119). In fact, Bawarshi (2003) considers the syllabus "the master classroom genre" which can "transform the physical setting of the classroom into the discursive and ideological site of action in which students, teacher, and their work will assume certain significance and value" (p. 119).

As a genre, the syllabus offers instructors a constellation of rhetorical strategies to describe the course, its goals and objectives, its structure and its correlation with other courses within the program, classroom and institutional policies as well as general logistical and procedural information (Grunert, 1997). It mediates the interaction both between students and instructors and between instructors and their colleagues. Therefore, the syllabus has to be balanced so that it can appeal to students, motivate and structure their learning, while, at the same time, can convince (senior) colleagues and external evaluators of the instructor's professionalism and the course quality. As Slattery and Carlson (2005) point out, for faculty, the syllabus is not only a class management tool, but also evidence of successful teaching experiences. Collins (1997) notes that the syllabus also facilitates the socialization of both students and instructors into the academic discourse community. Grounded in the conventions of the discipline and institution, it familiarizes students with new discursive sites and affords instructors opportunities to reconfirm their professional identity (Collins, 1997).

At first glance, the genre of the syllabus provides essential linguistic tools to effectively address both audiences. Power and authority, for example, can be conveyed by means of such grammatical devices as personal pronouns, modal verbs, nominalizations, semantic roles, and negation patterns. Baecker (1998), however, claims that some linguistic means, such as the personal pronoun *we*, are ambiguous: they "blur the distinction between power and solidarity and, in fact, allow power to be expressed as solidarity" (p. 58). Her examination of the usage of personal pronouns in fifteen syllabi demonstrates that many instructors use "false or coercive *we*s" in an attempt to show solidarity with the students (Baecker, 1998, p. 60). Baecker (1998) concludes that negotiation of power in the classroom cannot be effective if the instructors pretend to share authority and mask their role by misusing personal pronouns or avoiding them at all. Instead, she calls for the explicit expression of power in the syllabus.

As mentioned above, the syllabus not only mediates the complex social interactions within a classroom, but it also addresses a discourse community of fellow instructors and experts in the field. Participation in multiple discourse communities increases interdisciplinary interaction and paves the way for mutual enrichment not only in terms of new analytical perspectives, but also in terms of linguistic, rhetorical, and social strategies. From this dialogue ensue the most salient characteristic features of the academic genres in general, and the syllabus in particular – intertextuality and interdiscursivity.

Intertextuality is defined by Bazerman (2004, p. 86) as the explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary and potential future texts. In the case of the syllabus, the relevant discourses range from the class lecture and tutorial, textbook and assignment instructions to scholarly publications and research projects carried out by instructors; from the policy on late homework established in a particular course to the institutional regulations on academic misconduct; and from informally compiled recommendations on how to prepare for the exam in a course to pedagogical treatises on the cognitive underpinnings of learning/teaching. Thus, the syllabus brings to the fore interdependences between the classroom, research, and institutional genres. These interconnections Hyland (2004) characterizes as both intertextual and interdiscursive. "Interdiscursivity," Hyland (2004) explains, "concerns the use of elements in a text which carry institutional and social meanings from other discourses" (p. 107). Like textbooks, syllabi are interdiscursive for they reflect conventions, values, and practices of neighboring discourses and communities (Hyland, 2004, p. 108).

Intertextual and interdiscursive presentation of the course content allows students (and instructors) to activate relevant schemata and optimize learning and teaching. What is more, intertextuality and interdiscursivity foster initiation of novices into a new world of cultural and social competence (Hyland, 2004, p. 106) as well as reconfirm the instructors' membership in this world.

This world, Cummings, Bonk, and Jacobs (2002) suggest, should not be confined to an isolated classroom; rather, it should be expanded by means of Web based interaction tools. The digital medium, according to Askehave and Nielsen (2005), allows the syllabus to function in both "the reading mode," when "the reader zooms in on the text and uses the