

Title: Communicating Your Course Creatively: The Graphic Syllabus

Workshop leader/author:

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Creativity theme supported: Creative learner-centered classroom strategies

Participant limit: 40

Equipment requested: computer with PowerPoint software; computer projector; overhead projector; transparencies (1 per participant plus 2-3 extra); markers of assorted colors (1 per participant; can be shared)

Space requirements: Tables or desk spaces on which participants can write and draw

Preferred time: 150 minutes

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RATIONALE: The instructor's topical organization is the basic framework of a course and the core of the syllabus. It also reflects the instructor's own unique organization of the field or specialty for teaching purposes and, as such, is a piece of scholarship. Yet, despite the care and energy instructors put into their course design and organization, students rarely read a text syllabus carefully. Even when they do, they lack the scholarly background to grasp the "big picture" of the subject matter from a week-by-week topical listing.

An easy, cost-effective solution is a "graphic syllabus"—that is, a one-page flowchart, diagram, or concept map of the course topics, appended (on paper or online) to the text syllabus. It allows students to literally *see* the structure of the course. It also helps instructors examine and revise their course organization while engaging in an enjoyable creative activity.

ORGANIZATION AND ACTIVITIES: Figure 1, a graphic syllabus of this workshop, best describes the workshop's content and process and illustrates the kind of document they will produce. First, participants will learn why learners benefit from a graphic syllabus. According to research on learning and cognition, graphics make any subject matter clearer, more comprehensible, and easier to retain and retrieve, not only for visual, global, and concrete processors but for all learners. Being more efficient in conveying information than text, they require less working memory and fewer cognitive transformations. They show the "big picture" of the key concepts and dimensions and their organization and thereby enable students to see what pieces are most important and how they fit together and to process and store knowledge in an accurate, ready-made structure. Finally, they facilitate cognitive activities involving memory, planning, organizing, and summarizing.

Then participants will discover and identify the many variations in graphic syllabi by studying real examples, including those of "graphic metaphors," a variation which bases its design on an object (e.g., an umbrella, a floor plan). After hearing some design advice and cautionary words about complexity and directionality, participants will design a graphic syllabus for a course of their own, then present it for commentary to the audience. They will also learn how to flowchart the structure of a discipline or subfield and the progression of student outcomes for a course or curriculum. Information on software options will be furnished.

EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES: Participants will be able to:

1. Design graphic syllabi for their courses—and will draft one during the workshop.
2. Flowchart the structure of a discipline or subfield and the progression of student outcomes for a course or curriculum.
3. Facilitate a workshop on designing a graphic syllabus (for faculty/educational developers).

The idea of a graphic syllabus won the 2000 POD Bright Idea, and a paper on the graphic syllabus that I co-authored, "Show Them the Money: Using Graphical Tools in the Introductory Finance Course," won the 2002 Financial Management Association Competitive Paper Award in Financial Education.

Graphic Syllabus of This Graphic Syllabus Workshop

