

Creating a Student-Centered Course Outline

By Lin Yu

As an initial and important document, a course outline clarifies mutual responsibilities, helps set the tone of the course, and describes the instructor's beliefs about the value and educational purposes of the course as well as measurements of accomplishments (Gruner, 1997). To a student, a course outline is often the first impression of you and your course. It can also be an opportunity to communicate who you are as an instructor, provide a place to share your vision for student learning and illustrate some of the journey students may need to take to get there.

Research shows that a student-centered outline has a positive impact on student engagement and motivation as well as contributes to enhancing student learning (Richmond et. al., 2016).

The question is, what kind of course outline is considered student-centered? How does the student-centered outline differ from a conventional or teacher-centered outline? Is there a measurement for the degree of learner-centeredness?

The purpose of this handout is for you to explore the impact of a student-centered outline on student learning and how to intentionally develop one to reflect the learning happening in your course.

What is a student-centered course outline?

From the historical review, a course outline is viewed as a contract and considered a permanent record with detailed information about the course requirements (Richmond, 2016). Beyond contract and record capabilities, a course outline could also serve as "a cognitive map and learning tools for students" (Richmond, 2016, p. 2). In the course outline, instructors could provide students with the rationale of course design, the value of the course, the visual layout of the course, and ideally, strategies and resources on how to succeed in this course. Such an outline is a student-centered, focused on the needs of the students and their learning process, promotes student learning, and facilitates their academic success (Parks & Harris, 2002). Cullen and Harris (2009) define a student-centered syllabus as "an attempt to create community, a sharing of power and control over what is learned and how it is learned as well as a focus on assessment and evaluation tied directly to learning outcomes" (p.117).

Why construct a student-centered course outline?

"Creating student-centered course syllabi has become an important part of my teaching practice. They let me start to communicate to students the type of learning environment that we will create and use during the course. With a student-centered course syllabus, I can make use of a more conversational approach and provide students with an overview of the course, its

overall learning outcomes and the approaches we will use together as we collaboratively build our course learning community. I can do all of this before the course even starts by sending students a copy of the syllabus over email. I have had the privilege to work with outstanding undergraduate student research partners who have helped me build course syllabi that address students' questions and also generate one-page infographic versions that best help students quickly find information throughout the term. We have received a lot of positive feedback from students, with comments like 'I actually liked reading it because it was like having a discussion with you' being very commonly received."

- Isabelle Barrette-Ng

Richmond (2016) has summarized mounting evidence that student-centered course outline can have positive effects on both students and instructors:

- Students are empowered and behave better in class
- A student-centered outline may cause students to perceive the instructors as possessing more exemplary teaching characteristics and build greater rapport with them
- Students remember more details from a student-centered outline
- Students who received a very detailed outline perceived the instructor as possessing significantly higher levels of master-teacher behaviors compared to an instructor who wrote a brief outline for the same course
- Students perceived the instructor who wrote a caring or welcoming outline as significantly more motivated, warm, and approachable, as well as a less difficult instructor
- When course outline is redesigned with a student-centered focus, you can increase many intended student learning outcomes and improve perceptions of both the instructor and the course

Key components of a student-centered course outline

The content and the layout of a course outline may be determined by institution or department policy, but you as the instructor have "considerable control over the organization of the course, the design of learning activities, and the nature of class climate" (Stanny et al., 2015, p. 899) that you could create and implement in your course.

Cullen and Harris (2009) illustrate several key qualities of a student-centered outline including factors that establish community, factors that define the balance of power and control between students and the instructor, and quality evaluation and student assessment.

Establishing community

Cullen and Harris (2009) suggest that your course outline could be a great opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to create a community of learners. They also suggest

establishing the community through making yourself accessible, providing learning rationale, and incorporating collaborative learning into your class.

Sharing power & control

Cullen and Harris (2009) discuss the importance of relinquishing power and control through description of the role of the students and the instructor, bringing in outside resources, and through the tone and focus of the outline.

Student-centered evaluation and assessment

Cullen and Harris (2009) suggest that formative and summative assessment need to be tied with student learning outcomes to support student-centered outline. One strategy to implement in the course outline is to link the assessment methods with specific course learning outcomes. It will also help explain why a certain assessment method is important or valuable for students to undertake, in another word, what students are expected to accomplish by doing a certain type of assessment.

How to construct a student-centered course outline: Strategies and examples

“What I found helpful when starting to write a student-centered course syllabus is envisioning that I am describing the course to a student in my office. What would I want them to know? How would I describe the important features of the course in conversation with this student? What type of learning environment do you want to showcase? One of the tenets of my teaching philosophy is to work with students as partners. When writing my course syllabus, I keep this central tenet in mind so that I can invite students to work with me as partners in the course.”

- Isabelle Barrette-Ng

A learner-centered course outline could take different forms and shapes (Bart, 2015). There are various strategies to implement. You can incorporate one or more features to make your outline more student-centered. You will see examples taken from various course outlines created by University of Calgary instructors.

Strategy 1: Articulating learning rationale for assignments

Not every student understands the importance of completing required assignments. Provide a clear rationale for each assignment to help students connect assessment to their learning. Be more transparent about the purposes of the course as well assignments. Providing assignment rationale could save students a lot of time to figure out why they are asked to do those tasks and potentially motivate them to do better.

Example from BIOL 331: Introduction to Cellular & Molecular Biology (Barrette-Ng, Cobb & Muench, 2020)

Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
In-class and online quizzes 6%	In-class and online quizzes 6% Each LOW-STAKES quiz has been designed to help you assess your understanding of the various concepts we will be studying together this semester and to help you prepare for the exams. Further details on these quizzes will be given during the lecture component of this course.

Strategy 2: Connecting assessment with learning outcomes

An integrated course outline reflects thoughtful and intentional course design. In course design, course learning outcomes are created for the appropriate level of the class and learners in the class. Assessment methods are selected to measure whether and how well learners have achieved those outcomes. Connecting the assignments with the learning outcomes is a great way to demonstrate the rationale for certain type of assessment method and address the value of each component of assessment.

Example from BIOL 311: Principles of Genetics (Barrette-Ng & Cuthbertson, 2019)

ASSESSMENT COMPONENTS			
Component	Description/dates	Weight	Aligned Course Learning Outcome
Midterm exam	The midterm exam will be held from 6-8 PM on Saturday October 26, 2019. It will consist of a number of short response questions (no multiple-choice questions included) focused on the content covered in the first half of the semester. Room locations will be posted on D2L. Regularly scheduled classes have precedence over any out-of-class-time activity. If you have a clash with this out-of-class-time activity, please contact Dr. Barrette-Ng by September 27, 2019 so that alternative arrangements may be made for you.	32%	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Example from PSYC 203: Psychology of Everyday Life (Boyce, 2018)

Course Learning Outcomes	Assessment Methods	PLO(s)	Level(s)
Apply concepts and methods of psychology to real world phenomena	Multiple-choice tests, Team project	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	I
Critically evaluate the validity of psychological knowledge claims	Multiple-choice tests, Team project	1, 2, 5, 7	I
Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of research methodology used in psychology	Multiple-choice tests, Team project	1, 2, 3, 7	I
Evaluate the extent to which internal versus external factors interact to influence our behaviour	Multiple-choice tests	1, 2, 7	I
Generate solutions to personal, social, organizational, or societal problems using psychological research	Team project	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	I

Strategy 3: Communicating methods of instruction

Weimer (2002, 2013) suggests including a teaching philosophy in the course outline to explain to students what you believe makes good teaching and why you are teaching this way. You have planned your teaching with thoughtful and intentional activities to prompt student learning by leading them through a meaningful learning process (Winkelmes, 2015). However, not all students figure out why they are taught this way and the benefits behind the activities. Articulating this information in your course outline besides the course subject matter, learning outcomes, and assessment will not only help student better understand the rationale of your choice of teaching methods, but also could better prepare them to actively participate in the activities that you have designed to shape their learning experiences.

Example from BIOL 331: Introduction to Cellular & Molecular Biology (Barrette-Ng, Cobb & Muench, 2020)

Method of Instruction

To enhance your learning experience in BIOL 331 and help you hone your problem-solving skills, we will be using a flipped learning approach in the first half of this semester. Various studies performed at post-secondary institutions across North America including our own have shown that this approach helps you learn material at a deeper level and achieve greater academic success.

In using this approach, I will do some lecturing, but we will focus much of our class time on working together in teams to solve problems. The BIOL 331 teaching team is excited to use the

flipped learning approach this semester so that we can work with you during class and help you to apply your knowledge to various problems.

Example from PSYC 200: Principle of Psychology I (Holden, 2020)

Course Format

Instruction in this course will make use of a variety of techniques, including lectures, demonstrations, audio-visual presentations, discussions, readings, classroom problems, and (maybe) the occasional guest speaker. I outline these techniques below. As you read, I will ask you to notice that there are number of activities in which I expect students to be **active participants** in the learning process. Research shows that this type of participation improves learning and retention of material, and – anecdotally – it makes classes a lot more fun, too!

Strategy 4: Modifying language and tone

A course outline written in a friendly tone had a significant impact on how the instructor was perceived (Harnish & Bridges, 2011). Students often relate the instructor who wrote the outline with the tone of the outline. The research by Harnish and Bridges (2011) found that students perceived the instructor who wrote the course outline in a warm tone as significantly more motivated, warm, and approachable instructor.

Example from HTST 213: History of Canada since 1867 (Brackett, 2019)

Support: My hope for students is that you will find the classroom an exciting place to learn. No matter who you are or what your background is, you are welcome here!

Children: Breastfeeding children are welcome in class as often as necessary and older children are welcome in class occasionally, to cover unexpected disruptions in childcare. When children come to class, I ask that you sit close to the door so that if the children need special attention or are disruptive, you can step outside until their needs are met.

Attendance: Attending every class is encouraged and expected, but I understand that life doesn't stop at the classroom door. Communicate with me about what's going on so that I can work with you (especially if you're a student-athlete).

Strategy 5: Fostering collaborative learning

There are lots of benefits associated with collaborative learning. Besides providing opportunities for students to learn from each other and hone their teamwork skills, collaborative learning could help build a positive learning community amongst students. When creating a student-centered course outline, it is crucial to incorporate collaborative learning in your course (Richmond, 2016). With the practical constraints such as the large number of students that you may have or less flexible physical space that you may teach in that might be conducive to group work, some collaborative learning strategies could still be incorporated such as think-pair-share. Another strategy is to weave collaboration through assignments that encourage students to work together as a group during and outside of class time (Richmond, 2016).

Example from BIOL 313: Principles of Ecology (Flanagan & Cantin, 2020)

Teamwork in Lab:

We will be forming teams in the first week of class. Research shows that diverse teams function the best and produce the best outcomes. So, it's our job to make the team as diverse as possible. To help with this, we will be using ITP Metrics to divide you into teams based on previous courses you've taken, your major/year, work experience, and other factors that will help us form successful teams. These may feel like bit teams at first, but research shows that team of 4-7 individuals work best. As the team progresses, I am sure you will appreciate having the diversity of ideas and perspectives that come with a team of this size.

Strategy 6: Communicating role of the instructor and the students

What is your role as an instructor? Do you discuss or convey your role as an instructor in the course outline? The instructor has responsibilities in teaching and students need to take responsibilities for their own learning. "By sharing power, students gain a sense of autonomy, self-motivation, and self-regulation, and they may become more invested in the course" (Richmond, 2016, p. 6). Besides sharing the rationale of why you are teaching this way with students, another suggestion from Weimer (2002, 2013) is to include expectations for the instructor alongside with the student expectations.

Example from BIOL 313: Principles of Ecology (Flanagan & Cantin, 2020)

Our expectations of you:

- **Everyone has the right to learn as well as the responsibility to not deprive others of their right to learn.** Actions such as talking during instruction/lecturing, or using laptops and other electronic devices for non-class activities can be very distracting and affect others' learning. Please monitor your own behaviour during classes and restrict your use of laptops and other electronic devices to only those activities directly related to class to ensure that you do not distract others.
- **Please arrive at class on time.** Late arrivals and early departures can be disruptive and can result in you missing important information. We understand that there are exceptional circumstances when you may have to arrive late or leave early; please make your arrival/departure as unobtrusive as possible and be sure to let your teammates know about your situation in advance of the class.
- Please let us know right away if you are dealing with a problem or situation that is preventing you from performing at the level you want to be at in this class.
- Please treat your classmates and us with respect. There may be times when you are frustrated with something that is going on in the course and find it challenging to be patient. However, to maintain a respectful and constructive environment in this class, we ask that you are respectful of others in your words and actions.

What you can expect from us:

- We will treat all students with respect and do our best to make our expectations about how to succeed in this class clear.
- We will start and end classes on time.
- We will be available outside of class time to discuss course content or any other course concerns.
- We will prepare reading guides and organize review sessions for exams.
- We will post materials for lectures and labs on D2L on time.
- We will reply to emails within 24 h (except weekends).

Example from PSYC 200: Principle of Psychology I (Holden, 2020)

Expectations of the Instructor

- **To be punctual, prepared, and enthusiastic during class to facilitate student learning**
 - As I mentioned in the opening note on the syllabus, I love this course. I will always come to class prepared and happy to be teaching you.
- **To treat all students with dignity, respect, and fairness in order to provide a class structure that encourages learning**
 - Teachers who are disrespectful to students need to find another occupation. Seriously. A proper learning environment is one in which students feel safe to share their thoughts, experiences, or questions. Therefore, I have always treated my students with dignity, respect, and fairness. I do not play favorites, and I *never* belittle my students. I know that it is a bit daunting to raise your hand and share your personal experiences in class. As such, I hold *all* my students in high esteem, regardless of how well they perform in my classes, and I try my best to communicate this to them through both my words and my actions.
- **To grade objectively, consistently, and to return grades in a timely manner**
 - Again, I do not play favorites. In an attempt to keep marking from being subjective, all written materials are marked using a rubric (grading scheme) which is applied fairly and consistently to all students. The grading time may vary with time of year and the type of assignment. However, you will always have your assignment grades returned in as timely a manner as possible.
- **To be genuinely concerned about and interested in student learning and performance, and to be sensitive to student needs or concerns**
 - I always want my students to succeed. I do not provide “easy bonus marks” but I will readily try to help any student with *any* aspect of the course that they are struggling to understand. If special circumstances arise that might adversely affect your course performance, please let me know as soon as possible. I can’t help if I don’t know about it.
- **To understand and abide by the procedures and regulations outlined in the syllabus**

Example from Chemistry 201 General Chemistry: Structure & Bonding (Sullivan & Wheatley, 2019)

Responsibilities and Expectations:

What you can expect from the course and your instructors:

- All instructors will try to help you as much as possible. Do not be afraid to contact them. Their contact information is available on the course website.
- You will have several opportunities for formal feedback on your progress throughout the term (there are two term tests, one final exam, five pre-lab assignments, five reports and five tutorial quizzes). Each activity should help inform you of your strengths and weaknesses but also help inform future course offerings.
- We recognize that unforeseeable events happen. If this results in you having problems meeting any of your assignment submission dates, accommodations are possible. Procedures for making these accommodations are found in the appropriate sections of the D2L website.

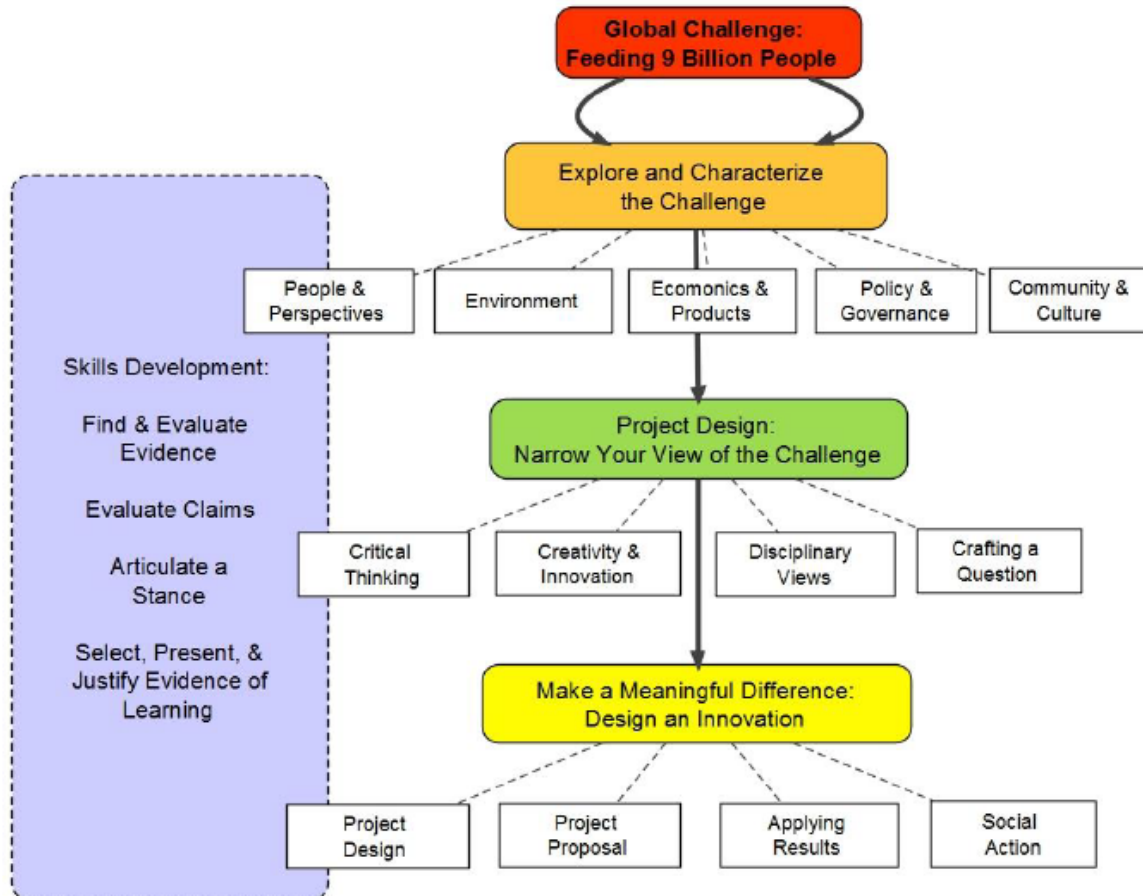
What is expected from you:

- Be respectful of everyone
- Come prepared for and be willing to participate in all class activities
- Be as organized as possible so that assignments are submitted on time
- Continually assess your performance and if you are struggling please ask or email either your instructor or TA's as soon as possible.
- In emails please use your @ucalgary.ca email address, include your name, CHEM 201 and make sure to use full sentences so that responses can be effective. Please anticipate that replies may take up to 1-2 business days.
- In lecture you need to make sure you understand how something is being communicated but in order to truly understand a concept YOU MUST PRACTICE, and this is why suggested problems from the textbook, class homework or past examinations will be provided.

Strategy 7: Make it visual

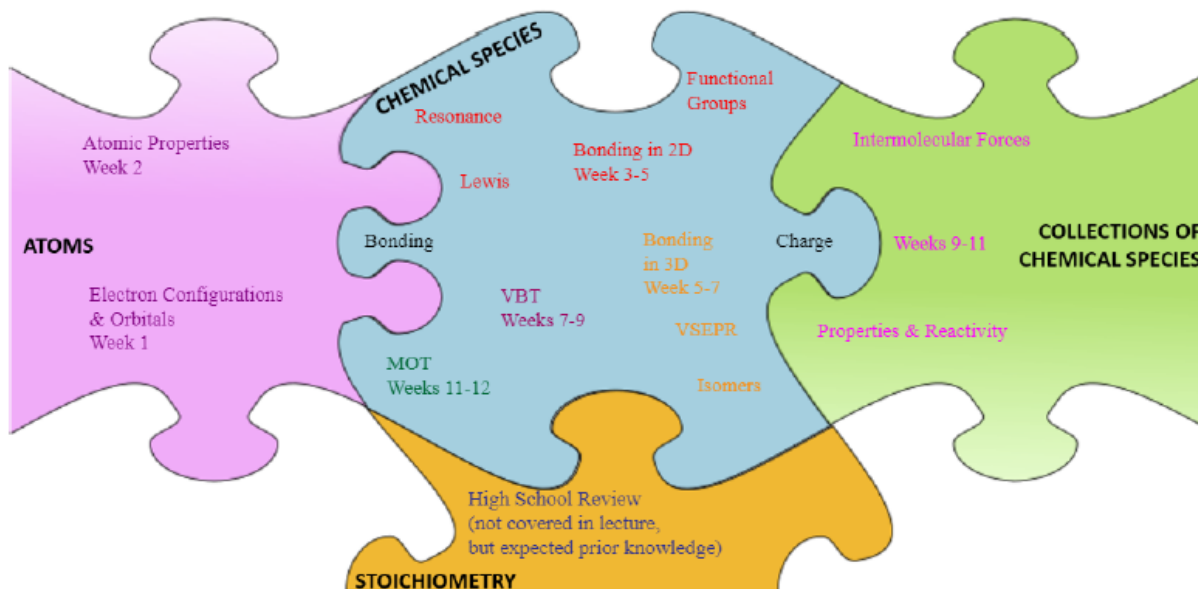
A picture is worth a thousand words. Imagine instead of reading a course outline with pages and pages of text-based information about the course, students are presented with images with thoughtfully crafted design layout with the same information conveyed by visual representation. Infographic course outline is an exciting visual way to provide information that is engaging and attractive to students. If you are unable to make the whole course outline visual, consider selecting one or more components of your course outline and convert the information from text to a graphic. One idea is to provide students with a course map by organizing the course content to a graphic to help students better connect with various concepts in the course.

Example from Univ 201: Global Challenges Inquiry I (Mueller, 2018)



Example from Chemistry 201 General Chemistry: Structure & Bonding (Sullivan & Wheatley, 2019)

Rationale for the course: Chemical reactivity is important across a broad set of disciplines and requires visualization skills. Evaluating chemical reactivity requires a sound understanding of chemical structure and bonding. In Chemistry 201 you will gain understandings relating to foundational concepts in structure and bonding (Atoms, Chemical Species and Collections of Chemical Species). The course map shown below is a basic skeleton and will become more detailed as the semester progresses. Through the learning objectives you will gain problem solving (critical thinking), laboratory skills (teamwork and communication skills) and the importance of being able to communicate using visualization that enable you to discuss the structure and bonding of chemical substances within YOUR discipline.....how cool is that!



*Dates can fluctuate slightly, depending on lecture pacing; this puzzle will be updated in D2L as the semester progresses.

Table 1. A self-assessment of how learner-centered your syllabus is (Richmond, 2016)

Directions: Please fill out the self-evaluation below based on how often you provide this information in your syllabus. Scale: 4 = Always, 3 = Often, 2 = Rarely, 1 = Never	Your Score
Community	
1. You are available for multiple office hours, and by multiple means of access, including phone(s), e-mail, fax.	
2. You hold open hours in locations other than office (e.g., library or student union).	
3. You provide rationales for assignments, activities, methods, policies, and procedures that are tied to learning outcomes.	
4. Collaboration is required through group work in class, team projects, or encouraging your students to learn from one another in other ways.	
Power and Control	
5. You encourage students to participate in developing policies and procedures for class and to provide input on grading, due dates, and assignments.	
6. Students are expected to provide outside resource information for class.	
7. You require that students take responsibilities by bringing additional knowledge to class via class discussion or presentation.	
8. Your syllabus is weighted toward student learning outcomes and means of assessment.	
Evaluation and Assessment	
9. Your grades are tied to learning outcomes.	
10. You provide opportunities to achieve extra points.	
11. Not all work done in the course is graded.	
12. Your syllabus provides clear and complete information about course grading/assessment.	
13. You employ periodic feedback mechanisms to monitor learning (e.g. graded and nongraded quizzes, tests, lecture-response systems, tests, reflection papers).	
14. You have both summative and formative evaluations (e.g. oral presentations, group work, self-evaluation, peer evaluation).	
15. You allow students to revise and redo their assignments.	

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