Annotated Syllabi: Making Visible our Collaborative Work in Instructional Development

Bethany Fleck, Kimberly Klimek, Virginia McCarver, Theresa Miyashita, Naomi Palosaari, Mark Potter, Keah Schuenemann, Adrian Shopp

ABSTRACT

Annotated syllabi are living artifacts that begin with a simple course syllabus and then grow in scope and in depth as annotations and links to additional materials are added. During the 2010/11 academic year, 8 members of a Metro State Faculty Learning Community collaborated using annotated syllabi to examine their respective courses. The authors found that the annotated syllabus is an ideal format for prompting the reflection that goes into course design and for fostering a systematic approach to instructional growth and development.

OBJECTIVES

Our objectives are to:
1. Describe the form and function of an annotated syllabus.
2. Argue that annotated syllabi facilitate a systematic approach to instructional improvement.
3. Explain how collaboration, both face-to-face and online, can optimize the advantages of annotated syllabi.
4. Provide first-hand accounts of how annotated syllabi have benefitted instructors.

THEORY AND METHODS

The annotated syllabus has specific advantages over the course portfolio as described in Bernstein et al. (2006). Both prompt reflection about course design and teaching, and both incorporate student work to assess teaching effectiveness. The advantages of the annotated syllabus include:

1. The flexibility to pursue inquiry wherever questions arise, wherever something especially innovative occurs, or wherever doubts may reside regarding course design decisions.
2. The annotated syllabus is not limited to retrospection. It is a dynamic, organic document that grows and develops throughout the instructional cycle.
   A. Before instruction begins, the annotated syllabus provides a platform to review, question, and revise the decisions that go into course design.
   B. While teaching the class, the annotated syllabus can be a venue to record notations about those portions of a class that have worked especially well or, conversely, those that may have produced unintended consequences.
   C. After a course the annotated syllabus can provide for retrospection, including an assessment of student learning.

Collaboration was facilitated by participation in a year-long Faculty Learning Community (Cox and Richlin). In the collaborative spirit of an FLC, members worked together to design the annotated syllabus project and explore its possibilities for instructional development. Collaboration within an FLC has also allowed members to review one another’s syllabi and suggest specific areas of inquiry.

EXAMPLES

FLC members have used a Wiki (PBworks) throughout the process of annotating syllabi. The Wiki space facilitates collaboration and is also suited to the multi-directional nature of annotated syllabi, wherein there are neither prescriptive prompts nor expectations for a narrative organization.

CONCLUSIONS

Instructional impact of annotated syllabus:
• Provides for deeper evaluation of teaching tools and practices
• Enables more intentional approach to course design
• Encourages a scholarly approach to teaching
• Facilitates collaboration among colleagues

Next steps:
• Create a public site to grow the project
• Continue to encourage a culture of collaboration around teaching

REFERENCES