



International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Volume 3 | Number 1

Article 33

1-2009

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Mark Barrow

University of Auckland, m.barrow@auckland.ac.nz

Recommended Citation

Barrow, Mark (2009) "**Book Review:** *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-centred Approach* (2nd Ed.) by Judith Grunert O'Brien, Barbara Millis, and Margaret Cohen (Jossey Bass, 2008)," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 33.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2009.030133>

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Abstract

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Keywords

Judith Grunert O'Brien, Barbara Millis, Margaret Cohen, Learning-centered, Course syllabus

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Book Review

The Course Syllabus: A Learning-centred Approach (2nd Ed.)

Judith Grunert O'Brien, Barbara Millis, and Margaret Cohen (Jossey Bass, 2008)

Review by

Mark Barrow

University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand
m.barrow@auckland.ac.nz

The dedication in this book clearly describes the authors' target audience – those committed to teaching students to value the processes of learning, not just the learning. Clearly aiming the book at instructors, the authors address them throughout, emphasising the personal responsibility that they must accept in facilitating effective learning; starting with a syllabus.

While a dictionary definition of a syllabus as an outline of a course or programme might suggest a minimalist document, many of us now provide students with listings of learning outcomes, assessment events, due dates, class timetables, session outlines, required and useful readings and resources, along with instructor details and availability. These outlines and their components frequently relate to institutional requirements or derive from expectations of external quality agencies and accreditation organisations. Grunert O'Brien and her colleagues take the view that a syllabus should go much further; setting out the instructor's philosophy of learning, explaining how this has influenced course development and how it will influence the way in which teaching for learning will occur. The aim of this approach is to involve students as active participants in the learning process.

To persuade us, and to provide guidance, the authors have divided the book into three parts. The first focuses on learning in contemporary society and sets the scene for what follows. The authors support a view of a society which increasingly values students knowing how to analyse, understand, assign significance, and interpret through developing intellectual skills like problem-solving, logical thinking and information-gathering, often subordinating the acquisition of knowledge and facts that underpin the discipline. Thus, the first section of this book tours selected literature to persuade us of the role of the course syllabus in achieving such outcomes. The authors note the increasing diversity of the student body. As well as considering the increased ethnic diversity and the greater range of students' pre-university experience, the authors also consider the millennials; students with an instrumental, means-to-an-end notion of higher education at odds with the transformational goals of the institution and (often) of instructors. This book suggests that a carefully constructed syllabus is an important step to overcoming these attitudes, clarifying expectations around the responsibility for learning.

This may seem a tall order for a succinct syllabus. However, the authors suggest that values lies in the process of getting to such a document. So the first part of the book walks the reader the process of course design using well targeted literature to challenge and provoke.

Section two is a 'how-to' guide, which steps us through the sections of an ideal syllabus, providing real-life exemplars of contrasting approaches. This gives an instructor a chance to benchmark his or her approach against that of others and to reflect on what may have been done in the past and how it might be modified. This is a significant section of the book (some 70 pages) and would provide any instructor with useful examples to use and modify.

Finally, in part three the authors provide a reference list of material readers might refer to in order to further their understanding of contemporary approaches to teaching and learning.

The authors aimed to produce a book for instructor use. The outcome is an holistic view of teaching and a persuasive and scholarly case for the development of a detailed course syllabus. They have moved beyond what might have been a list of 'top tips' to a challenging and motivating read for an instructor.

Will those to whom this book is dedicated find it useful? The authors appear to ascribe a high degree of autonomy to instructors that is not necessarily the case. One imagines instructors sitting alone, applying their philosophy to the development of outcomes, approaches and reading lists. The reality for many is teaching small sections of a course, providing courses that need to fit into a larger programme (or many programmes) and dealing with the demands of the teachers of advanced courses or of registration and accreditation bodies which might challenge the outcomes the book espouses. However, as a text to guide an instructor's reflection on his or her practice, the book has undoubted merit. It is well-structured, compelling and challenging.