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The Interactive Syllabus: Modifications and New Insights

by Scott Windham

In a 2003 article in *The Technology Source*, Sylvie Richards coined the term "interactive syllabus" to refer to a Web-based method of presenting assignments and course themes. Richards's interactive syllabus presents in a simple, chronologically organized table the weekly discussion topic, that week's reading assignment, and an array of supplementary information and activities in print and online. The interactive syllabus "solve[s] some fundamental problems in course design and delivery" chiefly by providing "a high level of initial interaction between the learner and the material" in place of the more static paper-and-ink syllabus (Richards 2003, ¶2).

Richards's design can be employed in all disciplines even though the samples highlighted most prominently in her article are from history and English literature. These disciplines are related to my own area of modern languages closely enough that I initially decided to adopt wholeheartedly Richards's approach. However, the sequencing of material in a language course quickly necessitated a reconceptualization of Richards's model, which led me, in turn, to interrogate the design principles and theoretical underpinnings of the interactive syllabus. The result was further insight into the possibilities offered by this tool, insight applicable in disciplines other than my own.

Renaming the Interactive Syllabus

A good way to explain my work with the interactive syllabus is to look at its terminology. As it turns out, neither of the words in the term "interactive syllabus" is completely accurate in this context, at least in my redesign of it.

Syllabus: A Misnomer

First, the word "syllabus." While Richards correctly describes a syllabus as the document that defines the course and provides a course description, goals and objectives, and broad descriptions of activities and assessments, the interactive syllabus is designed to enhance one specific area of the syllabus, namely the assignment schedule. Since the interactive syllabus is more about rethinking the design and delivery of student assignments than about fulfilling all of the traditional syllabus functions, understanding the interactive syllabus as a new type of assignment schedule is essential to the tool's effectiveness. It is related to the syllabus in that it replaces one of the traditional syllabus's purposes but is not synonymous with the syllabus as a whole.

On the surface no more than a tabular presentation of assignments categorized by weekly themes, the plain layout of the interactive syllabus belies a pedagogical richness. For instance, Richards (2003) provides an example in which a reading assignment on a Jane Austen novel is enhanced by biographical information about the author, cultural information about the city of Bath, a map of England showing the setting for Austen's fiction, and other resources. This diverse media encourages students to "engage with great autonomy in deeper explorations," resulting in greater understanding and higher-level thinking (Richards 2003, ¶6). That statement is at once an implicit critique of itemized assignment schedules that simply list, say, textbook chapters to be read each day and an echo of the emphasis on context found in Bransford, Brown, and Cocking's (2000) seminal work *How People Learn*. As Bransford and colleagues write, "To develop competence in an area of inquiry, students must . . . understand facts and ideas in the context of a

conceptual framework" (16). That is one of the keys to "learning with understanding" as opposed to simple memorization, argue the authors. By encouraging exploration of the milieus that surround an assignment, the interactive syllabus places assignments in a context that helps establish the conceptual framework that Bransford, Brown, and Cocking see as essential for real learning.

This emphasis on context places Richards's model squarely in the forefront of current syllabus design. Instructors in many disciplines are rethinking the design, purpose, and function of the syllabus, ranging from wholesale redesign of the entire syllabus to more modest tinkering with individual syllabus elements ([Exhibit 1](#)). Richards reconsiders how to achieve one of the functions traditionally assigned to the syllabus, an approach common to other undertakings.

Interactive? Not Really

If the word "syllabus" is somewhat problematic in this context, "interactive" is even more so. Although she acknowledges other possibilities for the term, Richards limits her own use of it. In Richards's (2003) article, "interactive" describes "a learner-manipulated environment in which concepts are presented in different ways and at different times, resulting in multiple and adaptive interpretations necessary for knowledge acquisition" (¶2). In other words, the interactive syllabus is interactive in the sense that students have the opportunity to interact meaningfully with the information provided.

Although I accept Richards's definition of the word "interactive," the term is loaded and causes confusion, given its proliferation and the radical advances in interactivity in such fields as real-time online gaming. Steuer's (1992) conservative definition of interactivity, which was formulated prior to the Internet boom in education, is a reliable measure that has withstood the test of time. For Steuer, interactivity refers to "the extent to which users can participate in modifying the format and content of a mediated environment in real time" (84). In this sense, the interactive syllabus is not interactive at all.

Given the limitations of this terminology, I suggest a new name for the redesign of the interactive syllabus: assignment guide. The assignment guide provides a collection of well-designed and well-chosen annotated learning resources in a clear framework to help students complete learning tasks and acquire understanding.

Features of the Assignment Guide

The assignment guide has two main features, each based on modifications of Richards's flexible design.

1. Combination of Well-Structured and Ill-Structured Techniques

Central to my design of the assignment guide has been my interrogation of the distinction between "well-structured" and "ill-structured" disciplines. Richards, referencing Spiro and colleagues (1995), says that key features of the interactive syllabus—what I am now calling the assignment guide—vary between these two types of learning domains. In a well-structured domain, writes Richards (2003), material "must be learned in an orderly, sequential fashion in order for the student to master the subject" (¶5). Ill-structured domains, in contrast, are less linear and "require students to appreciate complex interactions among several key concepts" (¶6). A good interactive syllabus, says Richards, acknowledges and adapts to these distinctions.

In employing Spiro's terminology, we must be careful not to perpetuate questionable presuppositions about the linearity or nonlinearity of various disciplines (although I do not suggest that Richards reinforces these stale notions). The concepts well-structured and ill-structured are most useful as descriptors of teaching practice rather than as reductive categorizations of entire fields of learning. In fact, Spiro et al. (1995) note that all disciplines display ill-structured features: "all domains that involve the application of knowledge to

unconstrained, naturally occurring situations (cases) are substantially ill-structured" (88-89). Mathematicians and biologists must consider the "simultaneous interactive involvement of multiple, wide-application conceptual structures" (92) just as literary critics and philosophers do. Rather than well-structured and ill-structured disciplines, I would like to speak of well-structured and ill-structured features of learning environments: well-structured design elements are those that offer a highly organized, stage-by-stage presentation of facts and concepts and ill-structured elements are those that encourage free, unstructured, nonlinear access to facts and concepts.

In comparison to Richards's approach, my model more clearly integrates well- and ill-structured design elements into a unified whole. Whereas the central examples in Richards's article primarily employ ill-structured features, my model demonstrates how well-structured and ill-structured features can be combined. To take one example, in my first-semester unit on German universities, students read a series of texts about the university system and write reactions in the discussion forum, a task requiring facility with the present tense of verbs. The assignment guide includes an illustration of key concepts about verbs, a technique Richards pegs as a well-structured design feature. Of course, knowing how to conjugate verbs is not sufficient to generate a correct sentence. Lexical, social, and cultural concepts are key too, and they must be addressed simultaneously. In Richards's terms, students must "appreciate complex interactions among several key concepts"—in other words, in an ill-structured fashion (2003, ¶6). The teaser on the present tense also hints at crucial issues of tone, register, and vocabulary choice. For example, the difference between "du" and "Sie," both of which mean "you" in German, is more than a lexical distinction. It is a crucially important social and cultural concept and one of the multiple conceptual domains that must be considered by the student and integrated into any speech act.

2. Teasers

The second key feature of the assignment guide is the use of teasers, a concept based on Richards's discussion of well-structured design techniques. Her discussion is brief but thought-provoking. In a well-structured domain, says Richards, "the interactive syllabus must initially present a representation that clearly illustrates the subject before soliciting further student engagement in projects or other activities" (2003, ¶5). In effect, the teaser jump-starts students' thinking about a new topic.

In the design of teasers, I rely on Catherine Fosnot's (1996) insistence on "giv[ing] learners the opportunity for concrete, contextually meaningful experience through which they can search for patterns, raise their own questions, and construct their own models, concepts, and strategies" (ix). For Fosnot, the process of constructing hypotheses results in deeper understanding as students build new knowledge on top of old knowledge—a central tenet of learning theory since the middle of the last century (Piaget 1952). In short, I provide primary materials when introducing a new topic and ask students to use those materials to reach conclusions about essential concepts. Only then do they engage explanations of those concepts. Since students work with this teaser first, Richards (2003) says, the assignment guide "puts into motion what would otherwise be a static and less intuitive presentation" (¶5).

In a teaser designed to introduce a lesson on the present tense, the illustration (Figure 1) is an image of German students describing their plans for the day. The captions exemplify key principles about the present tense, such as proper word order and verb endings, and the accompanying questions prompt students to theorize grammar rules that explain what they see. In my course on literature and film, teasers prompt students to induce the thematic framework for each unit. For example, a discussion on *The Downfall*, the 2004 film set in Hitler's bunker during the last days of World War II, is introduced by a short film clip and the provocative question "Are these typical Germans?"

Students formulate hypotheses based on the teaser and then modify those hypotheses when presented with contradictory or corroborating evidence. In the assignment guide, much of that evidence comes in a tabular presentation of resources divided into two categories: Learn and Practice (Figure 2). Here, each individual

resource is annotated to help students select which resources they prefer, and the resources are nonlinear in that it does not matter which materials students use first—or even whether they use all of the materials. The materials include references to the textbook and library books; textbook publishers' Web sites; third-party Web sites created by other teachers; online workbooks; references to videos available in my university's Language Media Center; images, music, and spoken materials; and streaming videos accessed through [Google](#) and [YouTube](#). Providing this variety is essential. Since different students will choose different strategies to solve a problem (von Glaserfeld 1995), they will need different materials to support those strategies.

3. Separation of the Assignment from Its Resources

How can the assignment guide address multiple conceptual domains without becoming unwieldy? Were I to include in one table the resources for the present tense alongside resources for the du/Sie distinction and the resources for vocabulary, not to mention photos, videos, maps, and documents illustrating German universities and their locations, the guide's sheer size would render it unusable. This means that the assignment guide must be organized by individual class meetings, rather than by unit themes, while still providing an overview of the unit.

I handle this problem by separating the assignment itself from the resources necessary to complete it and by grouping resources into categories ([Figure 3](#)). I begin by summarizing the assignment and providing an estimate of how long it will take to complete. Immediately following, in the Why section of the guide, I tie the assignment to course and unit objectives, keeping foremost in students' minds what the relevance of the task is and what they will be expected to accomplish upon completing it. The What section of the assignment gives nuts-and-bolts instructions and is followed by a section called Resources You'll Need. Here, resources are categorized according to theme, and each category gets its own separate page in the assignment guide. In that way, I can hyperlink sets of resources as long as the theme is still active, which provides both access to a wide variety of materials and a clear overview of what is available.

This solution addresses more than the purely practical question of organization. The division of the assignment into task and resources along with the categorization of those resources into conceptual fields conveys to students a central tenet of learning: Namely, that their every performance—in my discipline, each use of the language, from a formal class presentation to a quick IM with an e-penpal in Germany—entails a series of near-simultaneous decisions that draw on multiple areas of understanding. That in itself counteracts any simplistic notion of learning: Knowledge is not the rote memorization of material just as language study cannot be reduced to knowing the German words for things.

Pedagogical Implications

The differences between the assignment schedules of traditional syllabi, Richards's interactive syllabus, and my assignment guide are clear in form and function ([Exhibit 2](#)). By focusing attention on skills and concepts rather than on pages to be read and exercises to be completed, the assignment guide facilitates higher-order thinking and allows for more meaningful work during class, which changes the role of homework and what can be accomplished with it. In addition, the wealth of resources has led to a reevaluation of the relationship between the main resource (the textbook) and supplementary resources (everything else). Working from the idea that students learn better when they can choose the resources to help them learn, I no longer privilege the textbook but use it as one resource among many. The assignment guide provides access to Internet resources (text, audio, and video), references to resources in the university library and the Language Media Center, and page references in the textbook. Students may use the textbook to help complete assignments, but they are not bound to it. Those who prefer other modes of presentation or styles of explanation are free to choose among the other available resources.

Equally significantly, the assignments that I design and the class activities that follow from them can be more flexible, adapted to new content or to changing world events. I am not bound to the assignments and activities in the textbook, which, no matter how well-conceived, are always someone else's pedagogy, and in a discipline that tracks and reacts to international affairs as carefully as modern language study does, such texts can quickly become outdated. When German federal elections were suddenly called a year early in 2005, the assignment guide let me integrate that event into my courses far more effectively than if I had been following the textbook. In the latter case, I would have had to depart from the book for a special unit on the elections; instead, the elections became the central theme of assignments and class activities for weeks.

Student responses underscore the above points while highlighting areas for improvement. In course-evaluation questions aimed at measuring the effectiveness of the assignment guide, most students give it high marks. For example, one question is "Does the [assignment guide] help you complete assignments effectively?" Around 90% of students have said yes in response, adding brief comments like "very thorough," "easy to use," "really helps my learning," and "I like how it provides extra practice in areas where I need help." Many students have also indicated a preference for the assignment guide over the textbook, a theme that has emerged very clearly in 10-minute group discussions I conduct three times a semester as a supplement to the written course evaluations.

At the same time, some students have expressed dissatisfaction with the assignment guide. Comments such as "I expected to use the book every day" or "I want to be tested just on the material in chapter 1 of the textbook, then move on to chapter 2 and do the same thing" suggest that this dissatisfaction can be understood as students struggling with a shift in pedagogy. Others have commented that without a traditional textbook assignment, they are never sure when they have "done the homework"—an expression of insecurity about being ready for class. Still others find the amount of material overwhelming and think they are required to use all the resources presented, not grasping that the presentation of resources is intended to provide choices and to support the work of completing the primary task.

Next Steps

In response to these student comments, I have made my teaching practice more transparent. I explain why I do not teach from the book, how I will evaluate students' learning in the absence of traditional textbook-based tests, and how students can know when they are ready for class. The fundamental issue—and I need to make this even more explicit with my students—is that the assignment guide suggests a very different notion of learning. A rich academic subject cannot be mastered by reading the required pages in a textbook just as it cannot be exhausted by any compendium of materials such as the assignment guide provides. Completing a directed task and attaining a learning outcome implies the capacity to use and apply knowledge and to negotiate meaning whereas completing exercises in a book implies only the capacity to complete exercises.

A weakness of the assignment guide—in my personal practice, not in the design of the guide itself—is that I have not consistently named learning outcomes for tasks. Students always see the reasons for completing the task (in the Why section), but those reasons are not consistently framed in terms of outcomes, that is, what students will be able to do once the task is completed.

In addition, the assignment guide can be made more sophisticated by considering the special place of language itself in learning theory. The literature is packed with references to the role of language not only in negotiating meaning but also in constructing the self, others, and the process of knowing. Given my field of specialization, that seems to be an area I have inadequately considered in my design of the assignment guide. To give one example of a path of future exploration: In my assignments, I frequently ask students to compare practices and social norms across cultures, a task that clearly involves identity formation as students explore alternatives to their own cultural practices. Students are using language (German) to achieve this task, and the way they construct that language—particularly word choice and emotional inflection—indicates not only their surface-level opinion of these comparisons but also how they are

integrating this new information into their own self-identity. The assignment guide completely fails to support this process; it presents language as no more than a tool to express ideas. Additional features might better support that process, such as a section that invites students to explore multiple ways of expressing an idea along with the implied (positive or negative) connotations of those expressions and the effect of each expression on how students view themselves and their identity.

Conclusion

These inadequacies aside, I find the assignment guide of enormous use. Because justification is given for each assignment, including an explanation of how the assignment relates to course themes, I have seen that students gain a better understanding of the relevance of particular assignments. Because multiple resources in various media address different learning preferences, students report feeling more control over how they learn. In turn, I have gained greater insight into my teaching practice as I reflect on the purpose and design of assignments and build class activities that follow from them. Prior to using the assignment guide, my assignments were mostly limited to mechanical drills and static readings that I viewed as a warm-up for class. Now class activities and assignments are part of a continuous, integrated, semester-long exploration of the course's concepts and themes. My work with the assignment guide, including ill- and well-structured aspects, has helped me understand more thoroughly its potential as a transformative teaching practice.

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