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A Liquid Syllabus: A Visual Starting Point

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Abstract

A syllabus is the first introduction to a course. It can either provide a warm welcome to a course or be seen as an overwhelming list of rules and requirements, leaving students feeling that they cannot be successful. To use the syllabus to promote equity and inclusion in an online course, the author developed a web-based syllabus. This visual approach can welcome students. This interactive approach can provide transparency and support. It can also offer relatedness, accessibility, and social and teacher presence, which helps promote a positive learning community. An example of how this syllabus was developed and used in an online course is included. There is also an alternate way to create a visual, accessible syllabus. Students responded positively to using a liquid syllabus. Other course design professionals, as well, evaluated the syllabus as a beneficial strategy for inclusion.

Keywords: equity***,*** inclusion**,** liquid syllabus, transparency, visual interaction

Introduction

What if a new method could allow instructors to start an online course in a way that was welcoming and transparent? What if this start allowed visual interaction and firmly established the instructor as a supportive and approachable presence? What if this approach was not only a way to gain student buy-in for the class norms but also an opportunity to provide visual guidance on course content rather than dense text-based directions? To try a new syllabus approach as a basis for an inclusive learning community, would educators give up a traditional syllabus?

When I began developing an online general studies course for undergraduates, I was interested in implementing course design strategies that promote diversity of thought, fair treatment, and inclusion of all individuals. From the perspective of an instructional designer, my reasoning was that diversity, equity, and inclusion can be advanced by how a course is designed rather than just by the content of the course. Since the syllabus is the starting point of a course, that is where I started. The syllabus needed to be easy to access, visually engaging, and interactive. How could I do this in a way that would establish the importance of equity and inclusion in this learning community? What could I do to engage these students who may ordinarily skip reading the syllabus?

In this paper, I will examine how traditional syllabi may not support equity and inclusion. I will define the idea of a liquid syllabus, and then review the theoretical basis for using this new kind of syllabus. Subsequent topics include how I designed and used a liquid syllabus in an asynchronous online course, student reactions to the liquid syllabus, and the strategy review by professional course designers.

Objective

To use a syllabus to establish equity and inclusion in an online class, it is essential to consider what equity and inclusion mean.

Equity means a standard of fair treatment for all in a learning community. It ensures that all participants have equal access (Rucci, 2021). It is easy to think about equity in the question: “Does every participant have a chance for success in our learning community?” (Garcia et al., 2021, p. 139).

Inclusion in a learning environment ensures that everyone can be authentic and respected (Rucci, 2021). Inclusion concerns belonging, making connections, and having the safety to learn. According to Garcia et al. (2021), the inclusion test asks: “Are we hearing the ideas from all?”

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Now consider a traditional syllabus. Many such syllabi include aggressive language, compulsory words such as *must*, negative words such as *never*, or highlighted and bold text such as ***"Don't be late to class"*** (Taylor et al., 2019). They may also focus on a lengthy set of rules rather than student success (Taylor et al., 2019).

Understandably, instructors may need to be clear with expectations and close all the possible loopholes. Does a traditional syllabus, however, provide an opportunity for success and promote connection and safety? When I surveyed fifty-nine students at a comprehensive state university, twenty-nine reported feeling that there have been times that a syllabus has made them feel they could not succeed in a class.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how a syllabus can be reimagined to support equity and inclusion in a course. This new syllabus is a web-based, interactive, visual form of a syllabus designed to reach diverse students.

A liquid syllabus

When researching ways to prepare a welcoming syllabus, I was introduced to the work of Dr. Michelle Pacansky-Brock, a noted leader in higher education with expertise in online teaching (Pacansky-Brock, 2020). Pacansky-Brock (2020) proposed a liquid syllabus. She defines a liquid syllabus as a website-based tool devoid of aggressive language, easily accessible, and fluid so it can be adjusted when it meets the needs of the learning community (Pacansky-Brock, 2017).

This syllabus can be reached from outside the learning management system (LMS), making it more accessible to all students, including those who rely on a phone more than a computer. It consists of multiple formats for sharing information, including video and visuals, rather than just text. Moreover, it is interactive. Students can contribute to this kind of syllabus rather than having it handed to them. It can also be adjusted and updated throughout a semester to add new items as needed (Pacansky-Brock, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

To understand how a liquid syllabus can promote equity and inclusion in a learning community, I will explore two educational theories and how they support using a liquid syllabus. These theories are Self Determination Theory and the Universal Design of Learning.

Self Determination Theory

The Self Determination Theory (SDT) identifies three learner motivation and engagement requirements. They are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (American Psychological Association, 2021). Figure 1 shows how to apply the requirements of SDT. SDT maintains that when students have options in a learning situation (autonomy), feel supported and able to succeed (competence), and are connected in a learning community (relatedness), there are positive learning outcomes. (Hsu et al., 2019)

This theory, developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci in 1977, challenged the widespread belief that motivating students can only be accomplished by offering rewards (American Psychological Association, 2021). Even today, this is still relevant.

The component of SDT to consider when thinking about the syllabus is relatedness. Relatedness can be fostered by instructors working to be approachable, striving to ensure the learning community is open and safe (Bunce et al., 2019). Bunce et al. (2019) showed that black and minority ethnic (BME) students have many barriers to achieving autonomy, competence, and relatedness in higher education. This inability to meet the three basic needs of SDT erodes the student's goals for academic success (Bunce et al., 2019). According to Ramos and Wright-Mair (2021), imposter syndrome, or feeling inadequate in an academic setting, is a common issue among students with multiple minority identities.

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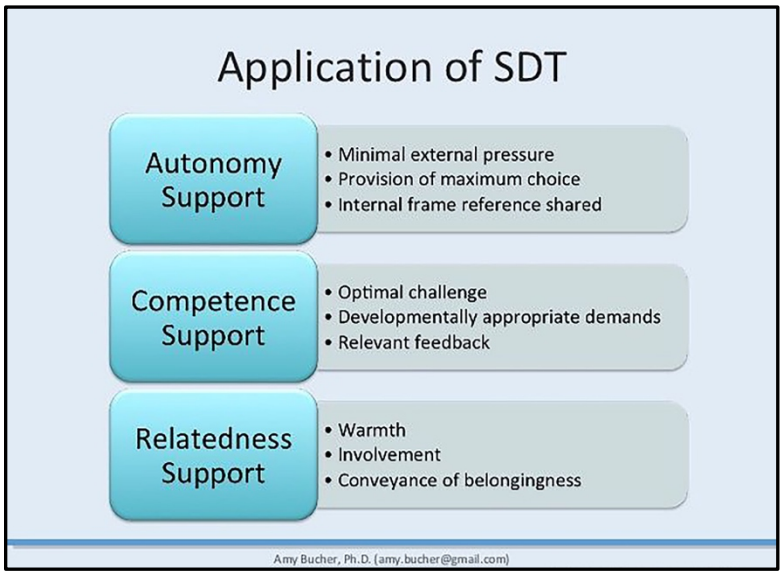
Figure 1
Application of SDT (Zacrosser, 2020)



If a liquid syllabus can support the SDT requirement for relatedness, it can help promote learner motivation and engagement.

Universal Design of Learning

Universal Design (UD) was initially developed in 1997 by architects, engineers, and product designers, including Ronald Mace, but now the principles can be applied to education. They are referred to as the Universal Design of Learning (UDL) (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2020). For education, the principals of UDL require three components. They are engagement, representation, and expression; the why of learning, the what of learning, and the how of learning (CAST, 2022). Although many think of UDL in course design as making sure that aspects of the course are accessible to students with physical disabilities, it is also about creating a variety of learning experiences that engage students in different ways to meet the needs of a diverse learning community (Dalton et al., 2019).

A liquid syllabus can help meet the goals of UDL by providing different ways for students to access information about course materials, including visual multimedia explanations rather than just text (CAST, 2022). This definitely changes the "how of learning."

It is important to know that more U.S. 4-year college students own a cell phone than a computer (Brooks & Grajek, 2020). The fact that a liquid syllabus can be reached from a mobile device makes it more accessible than a traditional syllabus posted in an online course, which needs to be accessed from a computer through an LMS. Even if students access course materials consistently through the LMS, it is a nice option to be able to reach the course syllabus from a mobile device if necessary for a quick check.

Example in an Online Course

Now that I have established the theoretical basis for using a liquid syllabus to improve equity and inclusion in an online course, I will provide an overview of how I apply it in an example course.

Description of the Course

The course where I used the liquids syllabus in Spring 2022 was GIS 4466, Sustainable Fashion: What and Why. Figure 2 shows the landing page for this course. This course is an asynchronous fifteen-week online course. It is a general study elective with the goals of helping students critically examine the fashion industry's environmental impact, analyze opposing points of view related to sustainability, and consider

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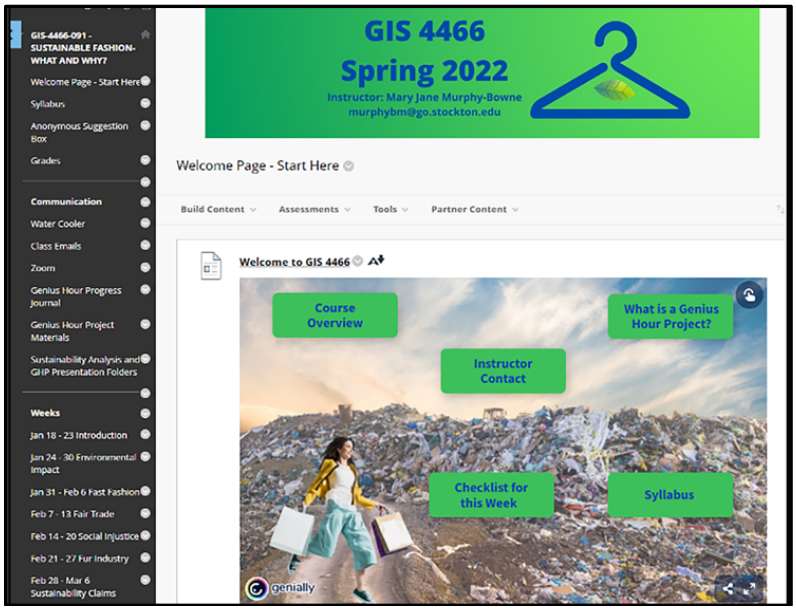
Figure 2
GIS 4466 Landing Page and Menu



personal consumer choices and their impact. The liquid syllabus was included as a link in the course menu, and the link was emailed to students a week before the start of class.

Twenty-five juniors and seniors were enrolled in this course and represented various majors. Spring 2022 was the first time this course ran.

Syllabus Content
This syllabus was created using Google Sites and comprised seven pages. I selected this tool because it is a free website creation tool. The pages included a home page, the learning alliance, the course schedule, assessment and expectations, resources, a Genius Hour Project (GHP) overview, and major class project pages.

Home Page
The home page included a welcome video. This provided an opportunity to establish an instructor presence in a welcoming way. It also included a video showing students how to navigate the course using the course menu to find all the materials. Figure 3 shows the home page.

Learning Alliance
The Learning Alliance provided the opportunity for students to contribute to the norms of the learning environment. It was inclusive in that all students contributed to the norms. During the first week of the course, students participated in a class activity using an interactive whiteboard tool called Mural. A set of expectations for the instructor and students in the class were included on the board as a starting point. These were the suggested points from Pacansky-Brock, (2020). Students added yellow sticky notes to suggest additions or edits for expectations for the instructor and pink sticky notes to add suggestions for the students in the learning community. Student suggestions are in Figure 4. Student names have been deliberately blurred for privacy.

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Figure 3
Home Page

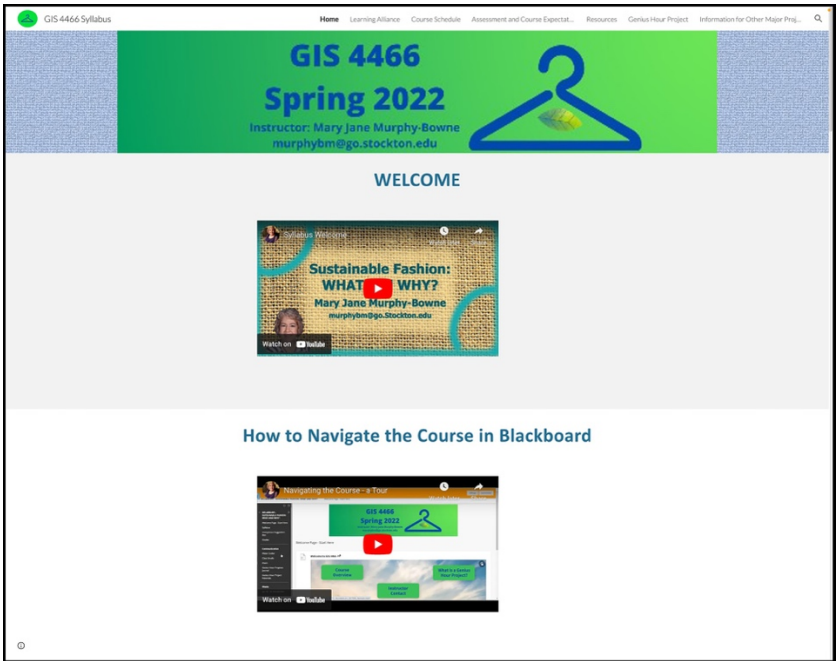
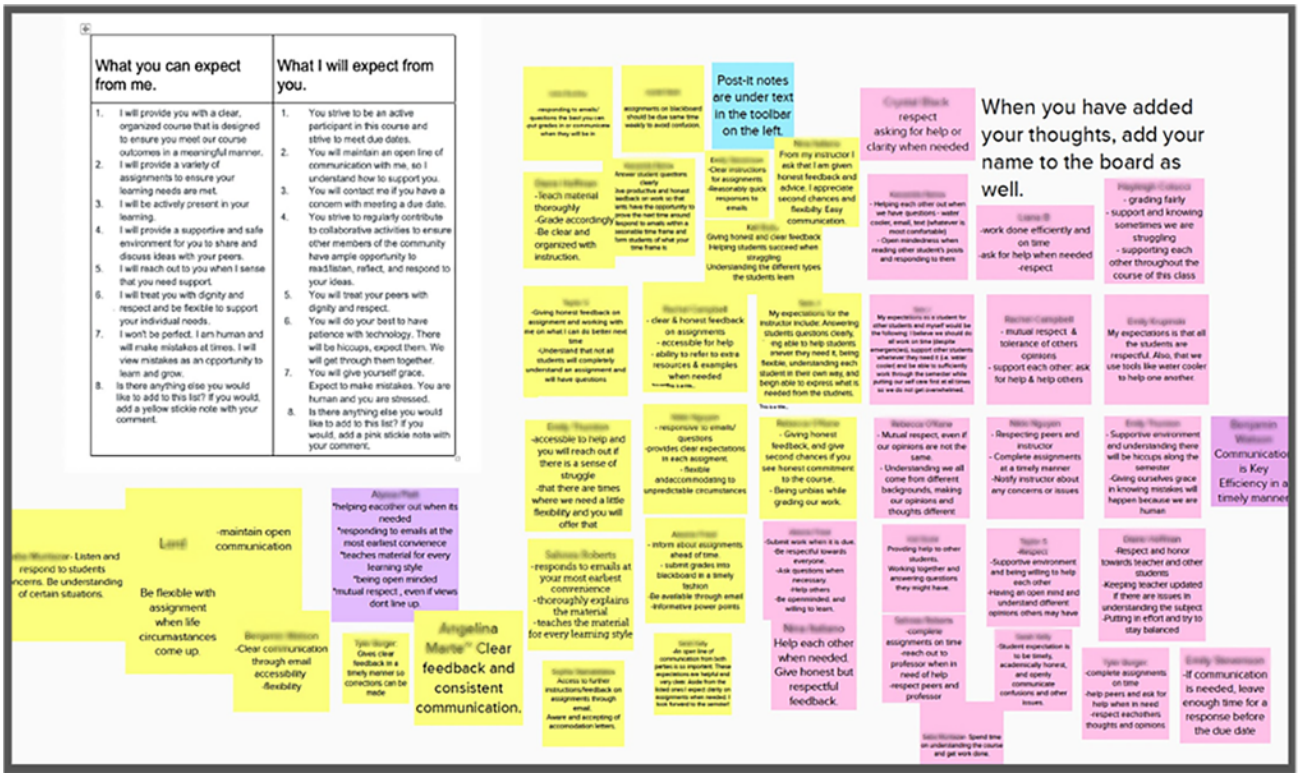


Figure 4
Learning Alliance Creation Activity



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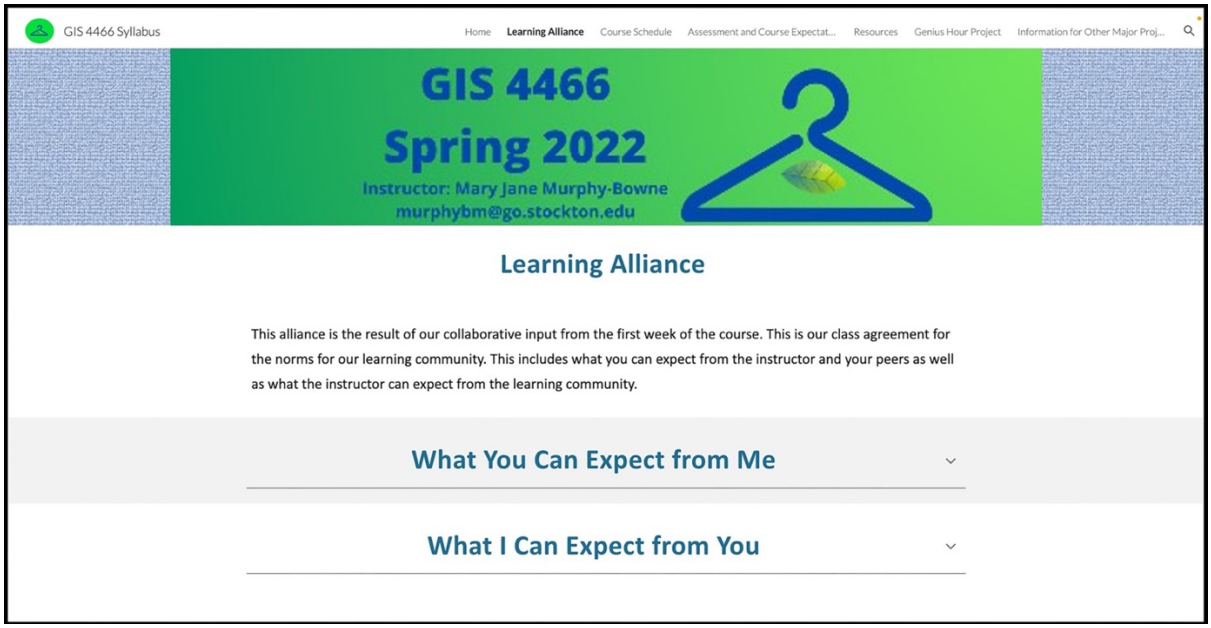
The suggestions were added to the original norms to create the norms for the learning community. These were then added as the learning alliance page in the liquid syllabus. You can see this page in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Learning Alliance Page



Other Sections
Other sections included a course schedule, an area that explained how the course would be assessed, and a section for resources. Here students could find information about major assignments outside of the LMS. The directions were not just text-based but included multimedia presentations to support the learners visually. New resources could be added when deemed necessary to support the students. The other sections can be seen in Figure 6.

Now that I described the liquid syllabus created for GIS 4466, I would like to discuss how I evaluated this strategy's effectiveness. I evaluated it from the student's point of view as well as the course designer's point of view.

Student Evaluation
I used an anonymous Google form to allow students to evaluate the design strategies, including the liquid syllabus I used in the course. Participation in the survey was anonymous, so the participants´ demographics were not collected. Out of the class of 25, 16 students consented to complete the survey. Of those 16, 14 submitted it. Open-ended questions provided qualitative data, and Likert scale questions provided quantitative data. Table 1 shows the results of the Likert question provided about the syllabus. Students showed strong agreement on a scale of 1 to 5, from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

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Figure 6
Other Syllabus Pages

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Table 1
Syllabus Likert Question Results

Question	Mean	SD
The syllabus helped me feel welcome in the class community.	4.571	0.646

Students also discussed the syllabus in their comments in the open-ended questions. Notable student comments included: "very different than what I am used to," "helped me to get to know the professor," "organized and easy to follow," "interactive," and "would have liked a printable version also." As a result of the request for a printable version, that is an adjustment that I have made for future students.

Professional Review
I also asked professionals with course design responsibilities to evaluate several aspects of the course, including the liquid syllabus. For the professional evaluation, 20 professionals were invited to participate, and eight submitted evaluations. Volunteers were recruited from the university where I taught the course, from the community college where I was employed as an instructional designer, and from the cohort and alumni in the university's instructional technology master's program. The professionals included instructional designers, instructional technology specialists, and higher education faculty members. Their experience ranged from one year to 20 years. These professionals evaluated the course strategies for contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion using a 4-point rubric, with four being the highest score.

The rubric was developed inspired by the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubrics for Online & Blended Learning (Quality Matters, 2021). Figure 7 shows the rubric categories and goals. Participants scored each goal on a four-point scale, with four showing strong evidence to one for limited evidence.

Figure 7
Professional Rubric Categories and Goals

Category	Goals				
Introduction	1.1 Instructions are clear on where to start and how to navigate the course in the Welcome section of the course.	1.2 Ways to communicate with the instructor and peers are clear.	1.3 The instructor provides an introduction that is welcoming.	1.4 Learners have an opportunity to introduce themselves to the instructor and each other	
Assessment	2.1 The ways that students are assessed are varied to support the strengths of diverse learners.	2.2 The course provides a variety of ways for learners to track their progress and receive supportive feedback	2.3 How work will be evaluated is clear to the learners.		
Course Materials	3.1 A variety of course materials are used to reach diverse learners.	3.2 There are ways for students to ask questions and get support if they need help with course materials.			
Learning Activities	4.1 Learning activities support interaction and active learning.	4.2 The instructor is actively present in the course activities.	4.3 The course activities support student autonomy.	4.4 The course activities are relevant to a wide range of students.	4.5 The learning activities provide opportunities for student collaboration.
Course Technology	5.1 Tools used to promote student engagement	5.2 A variety of tools are used.			
Usability	6.1 Instructions are clear and provided in a variety of ways to support diverse learners.	6.2 The course is accessible to a variety of learners.	6.3 The course is easy to navigate and consistent in how it can be navigated.		
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion	7.1 This course meets the needs of a diverse group of students.	7.2 This course provides a fair experience for all learners.	7.3 This course provides an open welcoming learning community.		

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Based on a 4-point rubric, the average score for diversity questions was 3.86. The average score for equity questions was 3.83. The average score for inclusion questions was 3.87. Figure 8 shows how the professional rubric goals were grouped into diversity, equity, or inclusion categories.

Figure 8
Professional Rubric Goal Categories

	Diversity	**Equity**	**Inclusion**
Item Number	2.1, 3.1, 4.4, 5.2, 6.2, 6.3, 7.1	2.2, 2.3, 3.2, 6.1, 7.2	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.5, 5.1, 7.3

The professionals also had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions. The question about the syllabus was, “How does using a liquid syllabus as a strategy support diversity, equity, and inclusion in this online course?” Notable responses from the professionals about the syllabus are displayed in Figure 9.

Figure 9
Professional Feedback – Notable Responses about the Liquid Syllabus

Notable Responses
I believe having the liquid syllabus allows the students to have access to course information in multiple ways (e.g. Blackboard and Google Sites) and intern gives the students the ability to access it anywhere. Also, adding the videos and actually seeing you can give the students the opportunity to be comfortable with you and see how you all could be relatable.
You invite students on a journey of learning something new. And you as an instructor invite learners to be your partners throughout the course.
Liquid syllabi allow course expectations to be explained in a variety of formats. It isn't as overwhelming as the "wall of text" of a traditional syllabus. It breaks down the syllabi more, easier to read, and easier to understand
The use of a liquid syllabus is a creative way to support diversity, equity, and inclusion in an online course. In this course, the instructor used a liquid syllabus to provide her students with a welcoming introduction video. Throughout the video, the instructor does a great job of fostering a connection with her online students.
Students can easily access and navigate the liquid syllabus on their cell phones using a link provided by the instructor. Overall, the liquid syllabus encourages students to engage in their learning experience.
Adding visual and auditory communication to the syllabus is a way of reaching diverse learners and helps clarify information and direction beyond simple text. Additionally, tis syllabus was nicely broken down by separate taps, which made for easy searching and points of reference, and also supports DEI.
A Google site for a syllabus has changed my perception of the way it should look. It's so naturally designed. How could it be any other way!? Wow!

The reviewers found the liquid syllabus to be a good way to foster a connection with students and found it less overwhelming than a wall of text in a typical syllabus. Although one reviewer commented, “I prefer an old fashion syllabus,” most of the reviewers thought that the liquid syllabus “allows course expectations to be explained in a variety of formats. It isn't as overwhelming as the wall of text of a traditional syllabus.” One reviewer even noted that “A Google site for a syllabus has changed my perception of the way it should look.” This is a strategy that could be shared as a new approach for supporting DEI for course design professionals, as many were excited by this new approach.

Alternate Formats

While the results from students and professionals were very positive about using a liquid syllabus to support equity and inclusion in an online course, is this a realistic undertaking? As an instructional designer, do I suggest this strategy to the instructors I support?

To be honest, I do hesitate. There is a significant time commitment to implement a liquid syllabus. It also requires access to a Google Suite account or another website creation tool. Some instructors do not have the time or the resources to implement this strategy.

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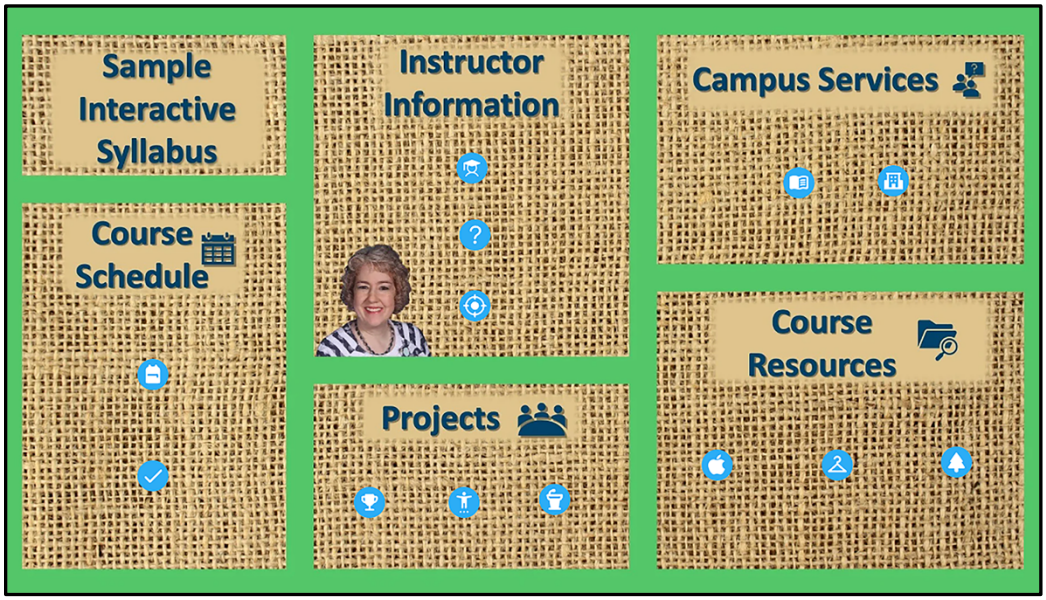
There is still a way to provide an interactive, visual syllabus that can be accessed outside the LMS. I have worked with some faculty members who wanted to create a more visual and interactive syllabus using ThingLink. ThinkLink is an educational media tool that can be used to create interactive images. This can be the basis for a visual syllabus that is easier to prepare. Using ThingLink, instructors can include multimedia, break up long text passages, and welcome students in a visual manner. ThingLink can be easily embedded in an LMS and can include a link for a fully accessible version. A ThingLink syllabus can also be linked in the course menu of an LMS, and access could be provided as a link in a welcome email before the class begins. The benefit of using ThingLink is that it takes less time to create an interactive syllabus than to create a Google Site syllabus. Figure 10 shows an example of a ThingLink syllabus.

Figure 10
ThingLink Syllabus Example



Summary and Conclusions

This paper focused on using a web-based visual syllabus to promote equity and inclusion in an online course. I discussed the definition of a liquid syllabus and the theoretical basis for using a liquid syllabus. I provided an example of how I developed and used a liquid syllabus in a course and outlined student and professional reactions to the liquid syllabus. I found the use of a liquid syllabus to be well-received. I understand that using a web-based syllabus can be time-consuming and may require resources not available to all faculty members. However, an interactive image tool like ThingLink provides an easier alternative for providing an interactive, visual syllabus. This new kind of visual syllabus can certainly be the starting point for a welcoming learning community and an equitable and inclusive course.

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