Developing and Designing
A Comprehensive Course Outline (Syllabus)

A resource from the
Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Learning (CIEL)
Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia

VANCOUVER ISLAND
U N I V E R S I T Y

Written by Liesel Knaack, Director, CIEL
August, 2013

First Things First: Seven Steps to Design Your Course

Before you start updating your course outline or syllabus, make sure you have thought about the design of your course. Here are seven basic steps to get you going – often done in the order presented.

1. **Recognize who your learners are**
   - *prior knowledge, emotional and intellectual development levels, demographics etc.*

2. **Write measurable and observable course learning outcomes**
   - *skills, knowledge and attitudes to achieve deep and meaningful learning of key concepts*

3. **Identify evaluation methods for demonstrating learning objectives**
   - *assignments, projects, tests, demonstrations, presentations (% of course and marking schemes)*

4. **Consider informal assessment methods to use throughout course**
   - *minute papers, tickets out door, surveys, peer sharing, consultations (no marks)*

5. **Choose appropriate teaching and learning strategies to allow students to practice new learning**
   - *active learning, student-centered, authentic, engaging and experiential strategies*

6. **Keep scope of content around key concepts and enduring understandings**
   - *absolutely essential and necessary content to include vs. nice to know content*

7. **Plan out your course content and how it will be organized**
   - *topics, content, scaffolding of learning experiences, time for application*

<p align="right">…..now develop and design your course outline (syllabus)!</p>
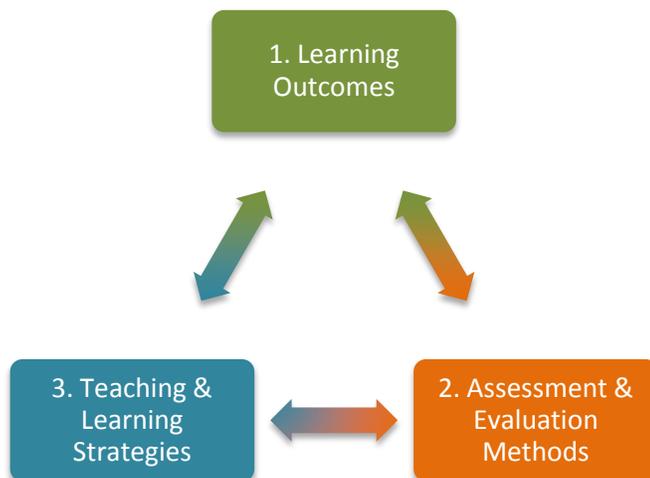
Roles and Purposes of a Course Outline

The course outline can serve many roles within your course – it is not just a document to share on the first day and forget about. Here are some roles and purposes your course outline could serve:

Share Expectations	A course outline will share formal and informal expectations of the course (student-related, course-related, behavior-related, goals of course, etc.)
Promises of Learning Outcomes	Specific course learning outcomes are really promises of student learning to be achieved by the end of the course. The course outline should include all outcomes to meet accreditation and accountability requirements.
Convey Enthusiasm	An instructor who is excited to teach the course will have a course outline that conveys this through the choice of topics, the design of assignments, and the organization of the course.
Set Tone	Students will quickly pick up the tone of the course through reading the content of the course outline.
Establish Contract	Some institutions will have students sign their name to indicate they have understood the course outline and its contractual conditions regarding content, objectives, and policies.
Define Roles	One can quickly determine the roles of the student and instructor after glancing over a course outline.
Assess Readiness for Course	A good course outline will give enough detail on course content that students can assess their readiness for taking the course. There may be prerequisite courses required or skills and abilities students should have before entering the course.
Outline Workload	By far the most important component of the course outline for students is how much work there will be! The workload should be clearly outlined.
Explain Policies and Procedures	There will always be a standard set of statements and references to policies and procedures. It helps ensure everyone is exposed to the academic expectations of taking the course and the boundaries they must adhere to.
Share Resource Details	Textbooks, workbooks, clickers, specialized materials, safety equipment, and so on, are some of the items students need for a course. The course outline is the place where this information is found.
Outline Big Picture	The course outline often will share how the course fits within department programs or institutional certificates, degrees or diplomas. You should share the big picture of how the course works within the grander scheme of the profession/discipline.
Serve as a Learning Tool	Well-detailed course outlines are excellent learning tools. They help students design study notes and follow along from week to week.

Integrating the Course Outline into the Course Curriculum

Consider some of the following ideas for integrating your course outline into your classes, curriculum and ongoing communication with students.

Post Course Outline Online Early
- As soon as you can, post your course outline to your website or learning management system course site in a prominent area for easy access (e.g., on main page)
- Send students a welcoming message and indicate course outline is available for viewing

Highlight Important Points
- In the first class, bring students' attention to the important points in course outline
- Have students share what they find most important (e.g., due dates, workload, etc.)

Course Outline Quiz or Scavenger Hunt
- Create a short online or paper quiz on the key components of the quiz, especially department policies and academic misconduct regulations
- Allow students to work in groups to find answers to quiz and hand in as a group
- Create a scavenger hunt for students to find answers to key questions!

Provide a Tear-Out Calendar
- Create small calendars that includes due dates for all assignments, readings, and tests
- Students will appreciate you creating this for them as this models how to organize time and priorities

Use Course Outline as Class Starter
- Make a point of looking at the course outline at least every other class with a purpose to point out relationships among content, to refresh due dates, and to re-explain policies and procedures
- Use as a graphical representation of course topics to introduce lessons

Designing a Graphical Concept Map of Course Components

Try building a concept map of all your course components with appropriate terms and linkages to demonstrate how the course fits together. Building on the work of Linda Nilson (2007) and her book "The Graphic Syllabus", more university and college course outlines are being built in a way to visually show students the interconnectedness of course components and how conceptual learning can be enhanced. Give it a try!
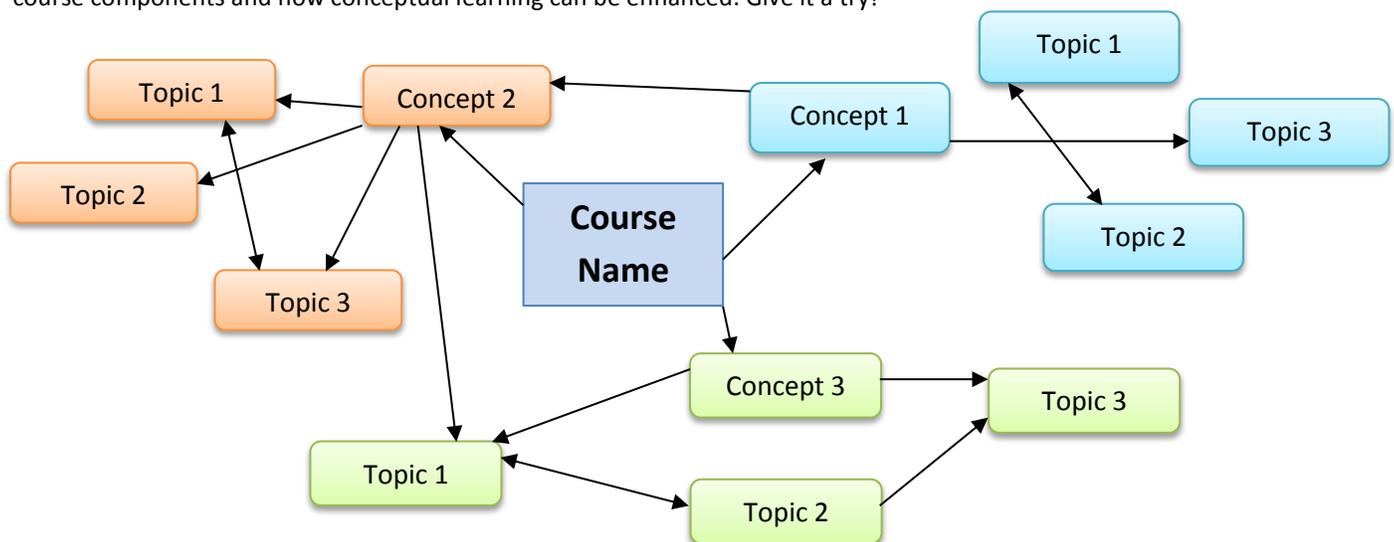
Layout Tips for Designing Your Course Outline

Create a calendar or simple listing of all due dates and tests

Consider designing your course outline in a Word or Publisher newsletter format. Newsletter format produces a far more readable document for your students.

- Use bullets for some content
- Use short phrases
- Make bullet size smaller to not overtake a list of items
- Align bullet closer to text

Go for a **sans serif font** for ease in readability of small content components (e.g., Calibri, Lucida Sans, Gill Sans, Century Gothic, Tahoma)

Provide value-add information such as study strategies or learning tips for the subject matter.

Use colour to provide contrast and visual interest even if you intend to print in black/white. Upload the digital version to your course site for students to see, and also project it in class.

Bold / **Increase Font Size** of Headings and Important Information
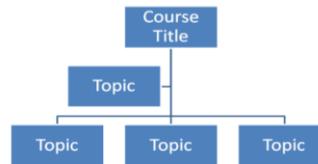
Try representing your content through a flowchart, timeline, concept map or a way of visually showing connections between topics.

Keep your course outline to the essentials. Put full assignment details in appendices or as separate documents to keep the course outline focused.

Use appropriate headings and sub-headings with a consistent font and size.

Don't make font size too small or too large. Different fonts will look different at various sizes. Aim for something around 11 or 12 pt. Print a test page.

Use a newspaper or newsletter format for ease in readability and interest.

Choose 2 or 3 columns to display content in your course outline.

Find an image that conveys something about your course and include it in your course outline on the first page.

Checklist of What to Include in Your Course Outline or Syllabus

Basic Course Information

In as concise a fashion as possible, list the following basics about a course. Students will frequently access this information. Just release work contact details for your privacy and protection.

❑ **Institution Info** (institutional name and logo, department/faculty)

❑ **Course Title** (full course title, course number, credit hours, year and semester)

❑ **Days and Times** (day(s) of week class meets, start and end times, start week and end week dates, days class is not held due to holidays or religious observances)

❑ **Class Location** (campus, building, room number)

❑ **URL** of course web site OR location within learning management system

❑ **Instructor Details** (name, title, office location, phone, email, office hours, preferred method of communication, appointments or drop in details, mailing address, other contact info)

❑ **Labs/Tutorials** (location, times, days and location, instructor details)

❑ **Teaching Assistants/Graduate Assistants** (name, office locations, phone, email, office hours)

Course Description

Students appreciate knowing about the big picture/overview of the course. Ensure you include examples of how you will teach the course and the anticipated workload for students. Learning objectives are a key part of this section.

❑ **Prerequisites** (courses, skills, permissions, how to obtain instructor signature if required)

❑ **Overview of Course** (key concepts/topics, how course fits within program, ideal audience for course, rationale/benefits of taking course)

❑ **Learning Outcomes** (list of what students should be able to know and do after the course is completed, possibly list alongside content topics)

❑ **Teaching/Learning Strategies** (list of strategies used in course e.g., lectures, group activities, questions, debates, videos, podcasts, to give students a sense of how the class will run)

❑ **Workload** (estimated amount of time you expect students to prepare for class, work on assignments etc. - students appreciate an honest approximation of your expectations)

Assessment and Evaluation Details

This is the first section most students access. They are very keen to see how you will be assessing and evaluating them. Include in-class assessment activity ideas to let them know how you will be seeking feedback on their learning and their views of how the course is progressing. Evaluation details will help them see where they will be demonstrating their skills and knowledge on the subject matter.

❑ **Term Tests and Quizzes** (outline how many tests or quizzes in course, total marks/percentage of each, taken online or in-class, open/closed book, short/long answer, multiple choice/diagrams/matching, levels of cognitive thinking skills required, dates scheduled, length of time, items can bring to exams or tests)

❑ **Final Exam** (total marks/percentage of final grade, date, length of time, in-class or exam timetable, number of questions, types of questions)

❑ **In-class Assessment Activities** (what to expect as far as informal gathering of information for student feedback, purpose and use within class, examples such as ticket out door, minute paper, etc.)

❑ **Evaluation Methods** (e.g., projects, presentations, demonstrations, essays – how many, due dates, marking info, total marks/percentage of final grade, submission format – online or hard copy, indication if they are any opportunities to improve grades through redoing)

Required Course Materials

Be sure to list all course materials from the textbook to any web sites or online resources. The most important component in this section is to indicate if the course material is 'required' or 'recommended', as students will surely ask!

❑ **Textbook** (author, title, ISBN, edition number, costs, where to purchase, availability of online notes or password access to publisher site for materials, use in course)

❑ **Readings** (other than textbook what readings are part of course, URLs/web links to readings, PDF copies on course web site or description of where to purchase/copy – ensure you have copyright free use of articles)

❑ **Course pack** (collection of readings printed and bound, cost, where to purchase)

❑ **Library Reserve** (share if a copy of the textbook or other readings are on reserve, how long can students take out on reserve/or in library use only, name or readings, location in library)

❑ **Specific Course Tools** (special calculators, safety equipment, medical supplies, art and photography materials, paper, clothing, software etc.)

Course Schedule of Topics/Content

This does not need to be a detailed explanation of the course content, nor does it need to make you feel tied to dates and topics each week. Students just want to have a general idea of the topics that will be covered in the course and the general progression of them throughout the term.

❑ **Tentative Schedule of Topics** (week by week, graphic representation by whole session, room for flexibility/change)

❑ **Format/ Modality** (explain mode of learning in course: face-to-face with web enhanced environment, blended course (partial online/partial face-to-face) or all fully online)

❑ **Special Dates/Missed Classes** (religious holidays, special events and times when the class does not meet, off-campus field trips, special performances, last day to withdraw from class)

❑ **Quiz, Test, and Exam Dates** (included in schedule)

Policies and Procedures

Try to phrase policies in a positive and friendly format so it does not sound like you are thinking the worst of students and are out to punish them. If you explain the reasoning behind policies, you are more likely to gain students' cooperation. Additionally, allow for students to ask questions to clarify policies.

❑ **Attendance** (lateness, missed classes, penalties, make-up procedures, reporting illness and personal/family emergencies, contact expected with instructor)

❑ **Assignments** (format for handing in, lateness penalties, extensions, missed, penalties)

❑ **Academic Misconduct/Dishonesty** (plagiarism, cheating, copying, signing permission form for submitting papers to online plagiarism sites, penalties for infractions)

❑ **Grading** (weighting of components, incomplete, pass/fail explanations, grade appeals, requirements for passing course, completion of all components)

❑ **Tests and Exams** (what to do if late or missed, penalties, procedures)

❑ **Participation** (expectations around class participation, involvement in group activities etc.)

❑ **Professionalism** (what and how you expect students to behave in your class, how you will deal with disruptive students, statement on use of cell phones in class, inappropriate use of mobile learning devices, other situations which may result in students' learning being affected, etc.)

❑ **Safety** (procedures for lab safety, health issues, proper attire, safety equipment needed, what to do in case of an earthquake, tornado, fire, hazardous spill, bomb threat, violent intruder, or other emergencies that threaten the safety of students in your class; notification procedures for inclement weather/impassable roads – radio, institution web site)

❑ **Respect** (include a statement about your expectations around listening and respecting the points of view of their peers, about how to handle any controversial course content and how to manage their feelings and words when they encounter different attitudes, opinions and information)

Learning Strategies and Resources

This is not a common section in most course outlines, but it is nice to include if you have some suggestions or tips to pass onto students. Students will be very appreciative of any ideas you have from previous students in terms of misconceptions, areas where students get confused, and what learning strategies are effective in terms of studying for exams and completing assignments.

❑ **Tips for Success** (different approaches to success in course, time management tips, common course misconceptions, sample test questions, topics that might cause confusion etc.)

❑ **Glossary** (technical terms, specialized information to help in studying)

❑ **Links** (to previous exam questions, student assignments, style manuals, web-based resources to podcasts/video/and support material)

Accommodations for Students

Your department or faculty might have a standard statement about accommodating students. You may also wish to approach the student learning/support centre at your institution for any further details on workshops, consultations, and information they provide for students of all needs.

❑ **Disabilities** (a statement inviting students with physical, medical, mental, or learning disabilities to approach instructor for any accommodations required for success in course)

❑ **Learning Support** (location, times, offerings of learner support centre/student support area at your institution, possibly invite a representative to your class to speak for a few minutes about resources and people there to help)

❑ **Missed Classes** (a statement about accommodating students who need to miss your class due to religious beliefs, observations and practice, athletic/sports team participation, job/admission interviews, family/personal emergencies, and circumstances out of their control)

Rights and Responsibilities of Students

Many institutions are developing rights and responsibility statements with both instructor and student bodies. Here are some examples that are showing up in course outlines:

‣ Right of students to have class meet on required days throughout term; instructors have right to expect students to show up on time for learning

‣ Right of students to have an instructor organized and prepared class; instructors have right to similarly expect students to be prepared and ready for learning each class

‣ Right of students to expect instructors to grade and return assignments and tests within a reasonable time frame; instructors have right to expect students to hand in assignments on time

Social Media: Privacy and Protection of Student Identifiable Personal Data

With the greater attention paid to the privacy and protection of students identifiable personal data on the Internet (e.g., name, class, address, opinions, gender) and national and provincial laws around the use of social media tools in the classroom, be sure to include something in your course syllabus if you plan to use social media tools (e.g., Facebook, Flickr, Google Docs, Skype, Twitter, Prezi, Instagram, etc.) for assignments or activities.

- **Notice:** Including information in your course outline about your use of social media for an assignment is an important first step. Ensure you have alternative arrangements for the assignment if students do not wish to use social media.

- **Knowledge:** Supply information as to why social media use has its risks. This would include information about the use of personal identifiable information being stored on servers outside of their country and how it would be subject to other countries searching and seizing anything written/posted they feel is inappropriate and a threat to country. This could lead to travel issues.

- **Consent:** It is always best to obtain student written consent to ensure students fully understand the risks when using social media. This is an instructor's best action for due diligence. See this link for more information and a Privacy Guide for Faculty: http://www.viu.ca/ciel/tech/privacy.asp

Disclaimer

- ❑ Include a statement about the subject of change to the course outline. Guest speakers, length of time to cover a topic, a field trip, or even some class formats may change your course details. Try not to change assignment and test dates. If there are any changes, inform the students both in writing and orally in class. Provide an updated course outline on your course web site.

References and Resources

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2011). Teaching for Quality Learning at University (4th Ed). Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.

Carnegie Mellon University. Eberly Centre: Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation. Write the Syllabus. Online http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/syllabus/index.html

Carnegie Mellon University. Eberly Centre: Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation. Design & Teach. Online http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/index.html

Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for Teaching.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Grunet O'Brien, J., Mills, B. J. & Cohen, M W. (2008). The Course Syllabus: A learning-centered approach. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Knaack, L. (2011). A Practical Handbook for Educators: Designing Learning Opportunities. DeSitter Publications, Whitby, ON.

Mayer, R. E. (2005). The Cambridge Handbook of Multimedia Learning. Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Nilson, L. B. (2007). The Graphic Syllabus and the Outcomes Map: Communicating Your Course. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

All photos courtesy of Vancouver Island University.

This guide is an update and major revision of a chapter in a Practical Handbook for Educators: Designing Learning Opportunities I wrote in 2011. This guide has significant changes and new elements added to it for 2013 and specifically to assist Vancouver Island University teaching faculty.