60-Second SoTL

Episode 1 – Designing Learner Centered Syllabi

(Piano music)

00:02

Can the language and design used in course syllabi affect students' interaction with these documents and students' perceptions of the course and instructor? That's the focus of this week's **60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning**. I'm Jessie Moore.

00:16

(Piano music)

00:19

In "First Impressions Matter! An Experiment Comparing Autonomous and Controlling Language in Course Syllabi," published in the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, SoTL scholars Jully Paola Merchan Tamayo, Meredith Rocchi, Jenepher Lennox Terrion, and Simon Beaudry examine how language use impacts students' self-determined motivation and perceptions of the course and instructor.

In a two-part study, the authors first created autonomy-supportive or controlling syllabi and surveyed 30 undergraduate students at the University of Ottawa to confirm that students' classification of the syllabi matched the researchers'. The autonomy-supportive syllabus used language adjustments like providing choice within assignment parameters, including rationales for course expectations, and acknowledging students' perspectives. The controlling syllabus used more surveillance language and passive constructions in sentences that conveyed course expectations.

In their second study, the researchers randomly shared either the autonomy-supportive syllabus or the controlling syllabus with 236 undergraduates and surveyed them about their perceptions of the professor, the course, and the students' own anticipated behaviors, including their motivations to attend class and how they would respond to four scenarios if they were enrolled in the course. Students who received the autonomy-supportive syllabus were more likely to perceive the professor as more supportive of their autonomy and choices, more likely to report a higher sense of belonging and engagement, and more likely to attend for self-determined reasons.

Overall, the two-part study suggests that professors and students both benefit when professors use autonomy-supportive language in syllabi.

01:58

In another recent I-J-SoTL article, "'Dope Syllabus': Student Impressions of an Infographic-style Visual Syllabus," Angel W. Kaur [Core] explores how the visual design of a syllabus affects students' engagement with the course document and their perceptions of the course. Kaur [Core] created three infographic-style visual syllabi for three undergraduate courses at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. 49 students participated in group reviews of the syllabi at the start of the semester and individual surveys at the end of the semester. The students reported that the infographic-style syllabi

were easier to use than more traditional syllabi, that the infographic-style made them feel less anxious about the course and that they felt more comfortable with the course requirements. Moreover, students expressed appreciation for the instructor's time and effort creating the syllabus.

02:48

Collectively, these two I-J-SoTL articles suggest actionable strategies for using language and design to promote self-determined motivation among students and to create positive introductions to courses and the professors teaching them. The articles also offer rich literature reviews readers could reference for other research-informed strategies for syllabus design.

03:08

Although these studies focused on syllabi, future SoTL projects could investigate applying these strategies to other learner-centered course documents.

To learn more about both studies follow the links in our show notes to read these open access articles.

03:20

(Piano music)

03:23

Join us next week for another snapshot of recent scholarship of teaching and learning on **60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning**, and learn more about the Center at www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org.

(Piano music)