TOPcast Episode #163:
The Online Syllabus: “A Welcome Mat for the Course”

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(Musical Intro)

Tom: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning…

Kelvin: And the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning…

Tom: I'm Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello, Tom. How are you?

Tom: I am super-duper, living the dream.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] This is what you dreamed of when you were a kid? “I would like to be a Higher Ed Digital Learning Administrator!”

Tom: [Chuckles] Yeah. I can't say that was on the list, but here I am. It's the new dream.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] [Sips coffee] Well, that's good. That's good. Well, at least there's coffee.

Tom: [Chuckles] There is coffee. I do have coffee. I have it here in my coffee mug, cup, travel mug.

Kelvin: What you drinking there?

Tom: Well, you're going to judge me. But it is yet another one of my few remaining pumpkin spice Keurig's K-Cups from our friends at Starbucks. So, it's a good after-lunch, afternoon treat.

Kelvin: Here's the good news. You're going to get through that stuff about in time to replenish it for the next pumpkin spice season.

Tom: That's true.
Kelvin: Yeah. So, there's that. Well, unlike you, Tom, my coffee is pretty freshly roasted, and freshly ground, and freshly brewed today. And interestingly, my coffee was calling out to me right as I walked in the door of one of my frequented coffee shops here in the area. Featured among a large shelf of freshly roasted coffees, this is a single-origin Burundi Kurusha from Sunergos Coffee here in Louisville, Kentucky. And we're told that the Kurusha in the name means “better than” in the language of Kirundi, and it was chosen by the roasters because of the unique selection process employed in this particular batch. And it is pretty tasty. So, I like it. I endorse it. Can you find some kind of connection to today's episode topic?

Tom: I don't know, you brought up the name. What'd you say? Better than?

Kelvin: Better than. [Sips coffee]

Tom: It's better than. I'm not sure if that's the connection, but I could probably make a tenuous one there. We're talking about stuff that we hope is going to help people do things better, maybe slightly. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: That's right. That's right. And the walking in the front door, in the front door.

Tom: Yeah. I see that.

Kelvin: Right at the beginning, something. And then I thought maybe even, I'm going to stretch this one a little bit, dealing with expectations, putting that “better than” on the label. Kind of raise your expectations a little bit. Maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe. You want to tell people what we're talking about today?

Tom: Yeah. So, it's probably worth mentioning that we're trying to listen to our listener feedback, and some of the feedback that we received in our most recent '24 TOPcast Listener survey indicated that we should occasionally go back to more bread-and-butter online teaching and learning topics. We do spend a lot of time talking about the leadership, and administration, and policy, and all kinds of stuff.

But our roots really are in the practice, and we've taken that to heart that we should probably do some more of that. So, similar to Episode #155, where we spring-boarded from Chapter 27 of the SAGE Handbook of Online Higher Education. That kind of guided our conversation about online discussions. We're going to do something similar today to inform our discussion on the important role of syllabi in online courses. So, we're going to try and draw out some of the…

Kelvin: But don't stop listening now, but don't stop listening now. [Laughter] It just felt like it was right there, right? So, no, no. Don't press stop.

Tom: That's right. It's fun with syllabi. [Laughter] I don't know, maybe that'll be the title of this one. [Chuckles] But it's an important topic, and it's something that I think we can spend some time on. And I think we're going to try to lean on the wisdom that we can draw out of Chapter 18 of the SAGE Handbook, of which I will say you were a co-editor, so yay.
Kelvin: Of the *SAGE Handbook*. Yes, that's right. And Chapter 18 is “Online Course Syllabus Design” authored by Dr. Daniel Ganu and Dr. Josephine Ganu. What are the odds? They have the same surname.

Tom: Yeah, total coincidence. I'm sure. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Maybe they know each other. It's possible. It's possible. So, we said that we would occasionally maybe go back to this *SAGE Handbook* and find some jumping off points, and look, maybe it’s a shameless plug, but there's a lot of good stuff, a lot of good source material in the *SAGE Handbook*. And so, excuse us for springboarding off. We won't lean on it too heavily, but we'll pull some nuggets out of there. So, syllabi, Tom, syllabi.

Tom: And just to put a button on that, it's the collective wisdom of the community that we're drawing on here. There's a lot of smart people besides us. I would argue a lot smarter than us.

Kelvin: Yeah, I agree with that.

Tom: That I think it's important that we hear from as well. And to stand on the shoulders of others who've done this work.

Kelvin: Yeah, no, that's right. That's right. So, I don't know. I don't know how to make a good transition to syllabi other than I was facetious about, "Hey, don't press stop." But it may not be everybody's prime, go-to topic.

Tom: But it's important, right? Just to set it up off the top, oftentimes the syllabus is framed as the learning contract with the student. Sometimes, there have even been lawsuits that have gone back to the syllabus like, "All right, what was promised? What was delivered?" All of that. And in that regard, I think it sets the expectations for the course in a lot of different ways. It's not just on the “thou shalt” or the “thou shalt nots,” but I think it's also a way to frame the course, introduce the instructor, and maybe even set a tone and a personality in many ways.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's right. And I heard you pivot even in your statement there. That word “contract” does get used a lot and maybe overused and maybe abused. And I'll say this, Ganu and Ganu, they do talk about that a little bit, but they kind of have almost like a little slider on a continuum of contractual-ness. I think they say something about rather than it being legally binding contract, it's more of an adjustable, dynamic agreement kind of a thing. But certainly, an articulation. But I love how you ended what you're saying there about, you spoke about welcoming, and inviting, and a tone, and so forth.

And certainly, it's arguably the first indication a student might get of expectations, and so it clarifies and communicates, maybe even more so in digital course modalities than in person.

Tom: I would agree. Oftentimes, if it's in a face-to-face class, it gets handed out the first day. And if you have a question, you raise your hand and just ask the professor. But sometimes that online might be in an asynchronous context, and you're not going to have that immediate opportunity. You might send an email or ask a question in a discussion forum or something, and you're not going to get that immediate feedback.
So, I think that puts even more pressure on the faculty member to try to make sure that the syllabus is effective, has clarity, but also is not impersonal because you're abstracted from that face-to-face environment where you can add your personality, and maybe crack a joke, or something that just doesn't really happen in an asynchronous environment as easily. So, I think it puts a little more pressure on the syllabus, but there are strategies that you can use to do that sort of thing.

Kelvin: Do we want to talk for a moment, speaking of strategy and institutionality, for a moment? Well, syllabi live at that intersection of individual faculty and students in a particular course. There is an institutionality and strategy dimension to this. I think quite often we end up talking about the importance of getting syllabi in front of students prior to registration, or at the very least, getting syllabi in the hands of students, hopefully in advance of the first day of the class. So, maybe they could knowledgeably drop, and if they're out of whack with expectations, or something. Why are those things so important, or do you agree that they are?

Tom: Well, I always encourage faculty to try to get their syllabi done well ahead of time so that students can review them ahead of time. We don't have that as 100%, but a lot of faculty do and to their credit, because I think it's sort of informed consent for students. They want to know what they're signing up for. I think even in some places, some states or some systems have a mandate that syllabi need to be provided ahead of time. It would be interesting if that's your situation that you kind of send us a note and let us know. Because I know faculty who are tweaking that thing up until the day before the course launches, and look, we've all sort of been there, I get it.

Especially if you're teaching something that's a little more timely and less timeless, and you want to make sure that you've got the latest and greatest in there. I do think it is a service to students to have that ahead of time. Now, the flip side of that is sometimes students will shop around and look for the course that doesn't have group work, or the course that doesn't have a paper, or whatever it is. They maybe don't have the most pure motives in wanting the syllabus ahead of time, but I don't think there's anything wrong with having it ready to go before the class starts.

Kelvin: Yeah, I sometimes say there's a breadcrumb trail between the course scheduling system and any communications that are there about things like modality, or class meeting patterns, or locations from that, to syllabi, to actually the experience in the course. There's a bit of a line that you could draw, and it's all about increasingly being clear, increasingly students knowing what to expect, especially around course modalities. But also, "I didn't know I was going to have to come every Wednesday," or whatever the thing, "I didn't know I was going to be required to do this thing or have this thing?" Or what have you. So, I think there's that.

I wasn't planning on commenting on this, but your comment about syllabi. [Laughter] And look, I'm as guilty as anybody, preparing to teach a class, still messing with stuff as late as I can, but then holding myself at least to a standard of, "Okay, I want to get at least an email out the door to students X days before the first day of classes." and try to at least get them a link to these course design documents, including the syllabus.
But to your point, even a sample syllabus or a skeletal syllabus, like a standardized version, to even say, "This is typical of, but may not be exactly what's going to happen in the class." So, we see things like a link from the student information system sometimes, or some LMSs you can make the syllabus public, you can have a link that way. So, these are methods, but just to overcome that obstacle of, "I'm still working on it." Well, I mean, you could just have an abstract of it a bit, a genericized version.

Tom: You could, and there's certain things that I think you probably know well ahead of time that would be of value to students, like what the book is and the meeting pattern. And if there's anything special that's not available in the course schedule that they registered for the course through, those would be really useful.

You probably know what your assignment dates are and maybe what the point values or whatever your grading schema is. But like you said, I think partial information is better than no information for students before that date. And yeah, I think it's just a courtesy that faculty should extend if they can to their students. Treat them like adults. They are. They're all over 18 a year in higher ed, for the most part.

Kelvin: For the most part. Probably can't say the word syllabus aloud without invoking the oft-voiced complaint, "But students don't read the syllabus."

Tom: Well, it's true. [Laughter] They don't, in many cases they don't, as a broad generalization. You remember from your time here, the Three before Me rule, "Dear student, if you have a question, try these three things before you start emailing me. Number one is read the syllabus. Is it in the syllabus?" The second is asking the office hours forum or something. So, there's these different things to try before you start just emailing because you didn't bother to read the syllabus.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: And there's some truth in that, and there are strategies that faculty can use to ensure that students, as much as they can read the syllabus, things like syllabus quizzes are very common. That forces you to scrounge through the syllabus, and answer these questions, and that's one way to do it.

Kelvin: I've even heard of little scavenger hunts and Easter eggs with points. If you got to this part of the syllabus, and you did this thing, then you'd get some bonus points, or whatever. And it's just an interesting... I don't want to pick on anybody because I've done some of this kind of stuff, too. It feels a little gimmicky though, and…

Tom: I think it sort of depends on what level. If you're teaching a doctoral level course, I don't think you need the gimmicks, right?

Kelvin: [Chuckles] You hope.

Tom: People are serious students, and they're there for the right reason. Maybe if you're teaching freshman level intro to whatever, freshman composition, or something like that, maybe. These students haven't quite matured in their scholarly dispositions enough to maybe rely on them to do it.
There was a story a couple of years ago, I think I saw on social media where somebody had embedded deep in the block of text in their syllabus. It was a long syllabus, but it told them exactly what book in the library to go to, and what page, and there was $100 bill in it. And he says, every semester I go back at the end of the semester, and the $100 bill is still there.

Kelvin: Yeah, I've heard that. And I wonder, is that lore? [Chuckles] But it expresses some kind of a concern over the lack of. When I was thinking about this topic, I was thinking about our recent episode with our guest, Dr. Jean Mandernach, and she talked about meaningful learning, relevance, and meaningfulness. And I thought those themes, she was talking about learning assignments, but I thought that seems to apply here, too, making a more meaningful syllabus from the standpoint of the learners. And maybe that'll open the door a little bit for Ganu and Ganu, their chapter Online Course Syllabus Design, does call out the importance of, and underscores, what they called the "Learner-centered Syllabus," being more learner-centered.

And then that reminded me of former TOPcast guest, Dr. Michelle Pacansky-Brock, she has been well-known, she referred to the Liquid Syllabus. I've always found personally that phrase a little bit confusing, but what she gets at is a goal of personalization and humanizing. But all of that stuff, boy, that would go a long way to getting a more meaningful grasp of the syllabus probably.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. And Michelle, I think has been an advocate for don't just give them texts. You've got all the media of the internet at your disposal. There's a lot you can do to humanize that experience, including video, and going on location, and here's what my dog looks like, and all of the things that kind of make you a human. So, it's not just this cold, robot experience online, which seems to be, for people who haven't taken many online classes, a myth, a perception, that they have coming into it, that this is going to be a robo-course, and it's not going to have any humanity in it.

And of course, that doesn't have to be the case at all. And you can set that tone right at the top in your syllabus by using some of those strategies, whether it is video or talking about things about your personal life that you're comfortable sharing. I know there's one faculty member here that she has talked about doing... And she won't put pictures of her kid in her course, and I understand why she wouldn't want to do that, but she puts all of her pets in there. And she'll go on and on with cat jokes, and memes, and things. And I think that's a way of injecting humor, and her students love it.

Kelvin: No, that's really cool. And I think just to pull on a little bit of what you said there, too, about if maybe you haven't taken an online class, or at this point in our developmental history, an intentionally designed online course, let's say, giving some guidance to expectations, not just what can you expect like a consumer, but what can you expect that I'm going to expect of you?

Like a level of engagement, a level of involvement, personalization, an activeness in the learning or whatever. So, I think in particular for digital learning course modalities, saying something about how the nature of the course modality, what that is and what that might mean for the learning experience in the course, what students can expect, what is being expected of them. That's important. In the olden times, I don't know if this is passe anymore, we used to talk about netiquette.
Tom: Yeah.
Kelvin: Netiquette.
Tom: How to behave online. Don't type in all caps, people think you're shouting. Yeah. Those things.
Kelvin: [Chuckles] That's right. That's right.
Tom: I think those still apply. I think the term netiquette may be a bit antiquated, but I think the general protocols still exist that people should probably abide by. And I also think that back to what students don't read it. As somebody who teaches technical communication, I do think there's a certain amount of usability design that should be baked into it.

I think one of the reasons why the students never found the $100 is because it was just buried in a ginormous block of text. And people don't like to read giant, half-page long blocks of text. It's just hard. And so, using whitespace, and putting images, or whether it's multimedia, or just headers, and all of the things that make up good document design should apply to syllabi as well.

Kelvin: Yeah. No, that's good. I'm going to call myself out, and one of your former technical writing colleagues, I will not call out by names. Once upon a time, I was working with this, now I think retired, faculty member in technical writing. And we were working on, as an instructional designer I was working with him, and we were working on the syllabus stuff, and he gave me all this stuff, and this is back in the time when we had... this was an approach at UCF that was used for a long time. There's a public website for each and every online course section.

Tom: That's going back a ways, but yeah.
Kelvin: And some of it was really well-intentioned. It was not a bad idea in the sense that you got a lot of this information that we're talking about out front early. And so, this person said, "Well, here's all the things..." We talked about the way that we did the... and he must have given me, I don't know how many pages, but we divided it up into, I don't know, multiple webpage sub-documents that would... it wasn't just one syllabus, it was the core elements of a syllabus, and then expectations, and protocols, and tips…

And I don't know, referring to fellow's name, I just said, "He had a lot to say." And then I've always been haunted by that because I've just gotten worse with age. When I'm teaching I just have so much to say, and I try to divide it up. I chunk it up, I give it like a guide to, "Okay, there's three different documents here. This one is for this, this one is for that, this is for something else, and do some of the things you said that..." But if I actually were to step back and look at it, oh, so many words, so many pages.

Tom: But you know what? It's also been wrapped up I think in this expansion of the compliance machine in higher ed. That there's more and more required elements in the syllabus. You got to have your plagiarism statement, you have to have your accessibility statement, you have to have... whatever it is. There's a lot of stuff that just has to go in. And then if you want to add any of your own stuff, that's on top of all of that, and it does
expand it. So, not that that's an excuse, but it's a piece of the puzzle that has expanded over time.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Maybe I'll comment on a couple of things as we start to wrap up that Ganu and Ganu do hit in their chapter that come from some of the best practices in the... there actually is something of a scholarly literature around syllabus design, believe it or not. You can go find it in the references to their chapter. But they… echoing some of what you said earlier, Tom, they emphasize the importance of the syllabus, setting a tone of "Welcome and Community" right away. And at the top of the document, inviting into some fashion and expressing oneself. And less is more probably, but getting that across. And then as much as you can throughout the syllabus, radiating the approachability of the instructor, "I'm a human. I'm assuming you're a human. I stand ready to help you. I'm going to be doing these things, but if you need me…" And sharing student-friendly ways of contacting the instructor.

But that's about more than just like, "Here's an email address," or something. It's about tone and messaging in multiple ways in the syllabus and in the course.

Tom: And maybe that's the message. The syllabus can be used, especially in an online class, as more than just the rules. It can be used as the welcome mat for the course. And…

Kelvin: Ooh, I like that.

Tom: ... it's a way to get things off and running with the right tone and the kind of spirit that you want for that kind of a course. And maybe I'll just add one more thing about just on the compliance side a little bit. Something that's going on here now that, in the State of Florida, I don't think it was going on when you were here. For general education courses, there is now a requirement that those syllabi be available outside of the course. And that's not just for online courses, but for any of those courses.

And there are companies, like we've engaged a vendor to help manage this process, and the faculty that are teaching those courses have to put their syllabi in that tool, so that it can be pushed out to students in a way that we can ensure compliance with this law. So, there's a cottage industry around some of this as well, for what it's worth.

Kelvin: Not calling anybody out, just asking. So, in light of all this stuff that we've been talking about, I love your expression there, a welcome mat for the course. So, in light of those aspirations, to what extent does that technologized, “make it public before the class starts” kind of approach, to what extent does that support or get in the way of that welcome mat?

Tom: I don't know if I could really comment because I haven't seen a lot of them because it's not run through our department. But what I would suppose is that it probably homogenizes them a little bit more than we would like, just because they're forced into this templated version. I imagine there's still opportunity to customize it, and put your own voice in there, but I don't know if there's opportunity to put multimedia in there. You might have to do that separately around the edges of that, within the learning management system. And there's ways to do that with course intros and stuff like that. But my guess is that it's more about compliance than it is about setting a tone, frankly.
Kelvin: A balance to be found in there. Wouldn't it be great if we could do both? [Chuckles]

Tom: Absolutely. And maybe they're doing better than I think they are. Who knows?

Kelvin: I think you're probably right, if I had to guess. [Chuckles] Shall I try to find us and paint us a Hanna-Barbera exit door on the wall and walk through it like Wile E. Coyote?

Tom: Sure. I was going to say air traffic control has cleared us for landing, but you've completely ruined my metaphor. [Chuckles] But yeah, let's...

Kelvin: [Chuckles] Well, let's pretend that I didn't say that, and you can just say the other thing.

Tom: [Chuckles] Okay. I said it then.

Kelvin: [Chuckles] All right. Well, so by way of wrap-up, perhaps we might roll this out. The course syllabus is an essential design document, and can be a critical tool for humanization and engagement, especially in online courses. But no matter how practiced we are in syllabus design, there is always room for improvement, individually and at scale. How's that?

Tom: Absolutely. Yup. Syllabi are important, but they can also be fun. [Chuckles] Both individually and at scale. So great. Thank you, Kelvin. Thank you, Ganu and Ganu, for the great work that we've been able to build off of today. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

(Musical Outro)

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.