

Engaging Students with the Syllabus Through Social Annotation

Kellie Claflin

The Ohio State University

Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership
200U Agricultural Administration Building, 2120 Fyffe Road, Columbus, OH 43210
614-688-0610
claflin.11@osu.edu

Tim Buttles

University of Wisconsin – River Falls

timothy.j.buttles@uwrf.edu

Engaging Students with the Syllabus Through Social Annotation Need for Innovation

The syllabus is an important part of any college course. The syllabus serves as a place to share course information, requirements, and university policies (Field, 2022; Fuentes et al., 2021). The syllabus has several purposes, including as a communication tool to share contact information and when and where the class takes place (Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). Essential information for students about how the course connects with other classes and the learning objectives for the course should also be included in the syllabus (Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). Additionally, the syllabus should provide a guide to expectations about participation, grading policies, and an outline of course meetings and assignments (Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). The instructor also implicitly communicates their approach to teaching and learning through their language and course policies (Bain, 2004).

It is critical that students understand the content of the syllabus. Especially when grading structures, flexible delivery methods, and distinctive elements vary from course to course (“Annotate Your Syllabus 3.0,” 2020; Blum & Kohn, 2020). The importance of the syllabus has taken on new meaning since the COVID-19 pandemic, as aspects of the course may change as life isn’t yet normal (“Annotate Your Syllabus 3.0,” 2020; Field, 2022). However, instructors often become frustrated when it seems that students do not read or understand the syllabus (Field, 2022).

One solution to the challenge of students understanding the syllabus is using a social annotation activity to increase student engagement with the syllabus. Social annotation allows students to add reactions, questions, and suggestions to the syllabus document in a shared environment. Completing social annotation with the course syllabus at the beginning of the term shows that the instructor cares about student input and welcomes feedback (“Annotate Your Syllabus 3.0,” 2020). Furthermore, the activity can help make your class more inclusive by focusing on students (Brown & Croft, 2020) through building community and connectedness (“Annotate Your Syllabus 3.0,” 2020).

How It Works

To facilitate the social annotation activity, the instructor shares a link with “commenter” level access to a shared Google Document or other platform. Students then add comments and reply to other students’ comments to ask questions, provide reactions, and make suggestions on specific parts of the syllabus. The activity can be completed in different class formats, either during an in-person class, as a homework assignment, or via synchronous or asynchronous formats of online courses. The instructor answers questions, clarifies any confusion, responds to reactions, and emphasizes important parts of the syllabus by replying to students’ comments within the document or in class.

Before beginning the activity, provide guidance on what type of annotations are acceptable by sharing examples, such as “what does this mean?” or “how will we present this project?” You can also encourage students to reply to other students’ comments to show

agreement or offer alternative views. Share why you include this activity in the course and how you will respond to their comments (e.g., during class or a reply within the shared document).

Results to Date/Implications

Social annotation of the syllabus has been successfully implemented across a range of courses at the introductory undergraduate, advanced undergraduate, and graduate levels. The activity allows the instructor to highlight important parts of the syllabus, clarify statements, and attend to questions or comments. Instructors also gain insight into student interest and experience with the course. Students appreciate asking questions in a low-stakes environment and seeing what other students are asking, which may spark additional questions or help them not feel alone and build connections between students early in the class. Overall, student feedback was positive towards the inclusion of a social annotation activity, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

- “I thought it was nice to have a chance to ask questions and get clarification at the beginning of the semester”
- “I enjoyed being able to see what other people were typing, and I found it very helpful. I got a lot of clarity on things that I thought I understood.”

We have also found that when the instructor uses the syllabus annotation as an out of class assignment it opens up more time on the first day of class for student engagement activities.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

We plan to continue using social annotation to introduce the course syllabus at the beginning of the term. From the instructor's standpoint, it is a beneficial activity to get a sense of the students through their questions and to indicate that you care about them. Instructors can use social annotation for the syllabus in any type of class (e.g., undergraduate/graduate, lecture/lab) and in any format (e.g., in-person, asynchronous). Another idea regarding the syllabus is to use the social annotation activity as a reflective activity at the midterm or the end of the class to collect feedback (*Annotate the Syllabus – OneHE*, n.d.). Additionally, instructors may use the idea of annotation to individually reflect and make their own notes throughout the course (Fuentes, et al., 2021; *Weekly Teaching Note | NYIT*, n.d.). Social annotation can also be applied to contexts beyond the syllabus to help students process and collaborate while reading (*Social Annotation | Center for Teaching Innovation*, n.d.).

Cost/Resources Needed

Syllabus annotation can be implemented with no financial cost. Personal Google accounts are free, and many educational institutions provide Google Workspace accounts or alternatives that allow commenting on shared files. Social interaction tools including Hypothesis, VoiceThread, and discussion boards can also be used. The amount of time required to set up a shared file for syllabus annotation is minimal, typically an hour or less to set up the document and respond to students' comments, and is typically offset by spending less time in and out of class answering student questions about information in the syllabus.

References

- Annotate the Syllabus – OneHE*. (n.d.). Retrieved July 15, 2022, from <https://onehe.org/eu-activity/annotate-the-syllabus/>
- Annotate Your Syllabus 3.0. (2020, July 16). *Remi Kalir*. <http://remikalir.com/blog/annotate-your-syllabus-3-0/>
- Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Harvard University Press.
- Blum, S., & Kohn, A. (2020). *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. West Virginia University Press.
- Brown, M., & Croft, B. (2020). Social Annotation and an Inclusive Praxis for Open Pedagogy in the College Classroom. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2020(1), 8. <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.561>
- Center for Teaching Innovation. (n.d.). *Syllabus Functions*. Retrieved July 15, 2022, from <https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/syllabus-functions>
- Darby, F., & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Field, J. B. (2022, February 9). *The Syllabus? It's On*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/02/09/how-college-syllabi-could-be-improved-opinion>
- Fuentes, M.A., Zelaya, D. G., & Madsen, J. W. (2021). Rethinking the Course Syllabus: Considerations for Promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. *Teaching of Psychology*, 48(1), 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628320959979>
- Social annotation | Center for Teaching Innovation*. (n.d.). Retrieved July 15, 2022, from <https://teaching.cornell.edu/learning-technologies/collaboration-tools/social-annotation>
- Weekly Teaching Note | NYIT*. (n.d.). Retrieved July 15, 2022, from https://www.nyit.edu/ctl/blog/annotated_syllabus_to_track_your_thinking_about_course_design