

An Investigation of Professor First Impressions as a Function of Course Syllabi

Abstract

Undergraduates ($N=174$) read a course syllabus with or without a welcome statement and provided evaluations. Students in the welcome statement condition had more positive perceptions of the professor, indicated more motivation to take the course, and indicated a greater likelihood to ask questions in class and seek assistance during office hours in comparison to students in the control group. Implications for course outcomes are discussed.

Introduction

College student success depends on motivation, and research on how professors can motivate students in the classroom is increasing. According to Crump (1995), student motivation is present when the student is excited to learn new information in the classroom. Marshall (1987) explained motivation in terms of the value and benefits of the academic material regardless of whether or not the student has an interest in the material. Bergin (2009) suggests investigating student-teacher relationships rather than taking alternative, more costly routes to improve student success. Students who feel attached to their professors work harder and obtain higher grades and test scores (Bergin, 2009).

The course syllabus remains an important communication tool for both students and professors, but research on the course syllabus as a communication device is limited in the scientific literature. Becker and Calhoun (1999) conducted a study to see what portions of a syllabus introductory psychology students would rate as important and found students valued professor accessibility. Thompson (2007) conducted professor interviews and found that many professors used welcoming communication strategies on their course syllabi. In a study by Wilson and Wilson (2007) students were presented with a positive and negative video presentation of a professor and students in the positive professor presentation reported higher motivation at the conclusion of the study.

Current Study Hypotheses

The present experimental study examined the effect of course syllabus content on students' first impressions of a professor and their course-related motivation. The researchers hypothesized that a course syllabus with a welcome statement would have a more positive effect on student motivation and professor/course perception in comparison to a course syllabus without a welcome statement.

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Method

The experiment involved a single-factor between-subjects design and the independent variable was the presence or absence of a professor welcome statement on the course syllabus. The dependent variables were student perceptions of the professor and course-related motivation responses.

Participants

Undergraduates ($N=174$) from Coastal Carolina University, a mid-size public, liberal arts institution in the Southeastern U.S. participated as part of a research requirement in introductory Psychology courses. There were 59 men and 115 women. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 35 ($M=19.55$, $SD=2.18$). Seventeen participants were excluded for failure to follow instructions. The majority of participants were Caucasian (140), while 28 were African American, 3 were Hispanic, 2 were Native American, and 1 was Asian. The class rank of the participants consisted of nearly all first year students (104), while 33 were sophomores, 20 were juniors, and 17 were seniors.

Materials & Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to the course syllabus welcome statement group or the course syllabus no welcome statement group. The course syllabi used in the present study varied only in the presence or absence of the professor welcome statement. The name and gender of the professor were withheld and a community health policy syllabus was used so that previous class experiences would not affect the results of the current study.

Participants read a fictitious "Community Health Policy" course syllabus with either a welcome statement (see [Syllabus with Welcome Statement](#)) or no welcome statement.

Immediately after reading the syllabus, participants answered questions about their perceptions of the professor (1=*very unfavorable*, 7=*very favorable*) based on the course syllabus and motivational questions (1=*very unmotivated*, 7=*very motivated*) on a 7-point Likert scale.

Participants then completed questions on a demographic survey which included questions about age, gender, race, class rank, and college major.

Syllabus with Welcome Statement

Dr. K.A. Clarke, PhD.
email: kelapier@coastal.edu
HLT 101: Community Health Policy
MWF - 11:00am - 11:50am

Office Hours (or by appt):
MWF: 12:00pm - 3:00pm
TTh: 11:00am - 1:00pm

Welcome to Community Health Policy!
Thank you for enrolling in this course! Community health policy is my area of expertise, and I hope that as we work together this semester you will share my enthusiasm for this material. I am excited to be here and look forward to getting to know each of you on a personal and professional basis as the semester progresses. I want to hear from you if you have any questions, concerns, or feedback. I am available during my office hours, by appointment or request of the student, and via email. Please do not hesitate to contact me for any reason.

Course Objectives
The course is designed to help students develop a basic understanding of social concepts and processes that influence health status and public health interventions. The key social concepts we will look at include culture, race/ethnicity, gender, poverty, behavior changes, community, and family. These social concepts will be approached through lectures, discussion, readings, and individual writings. This course will help students develop an understanding of public health interventions, public health policy and decision making, and public health concerns within communities.

Attendance Policy
I will take attendance every class of the semester. Perfect attendance at the end of the semester will earn you 10 points towards your accumulated point total. I expect you to participate and contribute to all class discussions. I hope this will serve as an incentive for you to attend each class and to actively participate.

Course Format
PowerPoint lectures will supplement class handouts and discussion materials throughout the semester. Our classes will employ a range of outside materials that will be provided to you as the semester progresses. Individual writings will be due 5 times in the semester. These will summarize what you have learned from previous weeks, and incorporate your ideas on community public health for the specific social concept that we have reviewed. These papers will be at least 2-3 pages in length and will be graded on quality of writing and review of the social concepts. Class discussions will be conducted every Friday and will aid in your understanding of previous material and new material for the upcoming week.

Grading Policy
Individual Writings - 30 points per paper x 5 = 150 possible points
Class Discussions - 10 points per class x 15 classes = 150 possible points
Mid-term Exam - 100 points
Final Exam - 100 points

450 - 500 points = A	435 - 449 points = B+	400 - 434 points = B
385 - 399 points = C+	350 - 384 points = C	335 - 349 points = D+
300 - 334 points = D	Below 300 points = F	

Academic Integrity Policy:
Any form of cheating or plagiarism on any assignment will result in a grade of ZERO for that assignment and a possible F in the course. There are no exceptions on this policy and academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated.

Results

Students' initial perceptions of the professor were more positive in the welcome statement group ($M=5.95$, $SD=1.04$) compared to the no welcome statement group ($M=4.94$, $SD=1.41$), $t(172)=11.192$, $p=.001$, $d=1.71$.

Students were also more motivated to take the course in the welcome statement group compared to the no welcome statement group, $t(172)=5.28$, $p=.001$, $d=.80$, more likely to ask questions in class, $t(172)=12.67$, $p<.001$, $d=1.93$, and seek assistance from the professor during office hours, $t(172)=8.83$, $p=.003$, $d=1.35$. See [Figure](#) for motivational rating outcomes.

Figure. Mean Motivational Ratings by Question.



Note. All welcome statement and no welcome statement group means were significantly different, $p<.01$.

Discussion

The study hypotheses were supported. Students responded more positively with respect to professor first impressions and motivational intentions to a course syllabus with a welcome statement in comparison to a course syllabus without a welcome statement.

In future studies the researchers recommend using a standardized motivational assessment to increase validity. Applying the syllabus technique used in the current study to a first day classroom experience would also be most beneficial. If a simple course syllabus manipulation on the first day of class can help increase student motivation and perceptions of the professor, then students may be more likely to be successful in the course.

Limitations of the current research include reliance on self-report data and hypothetical impressions and motivations. Actual professors and courses with welcome statements in syllabi would increase the realism of the research.

Positive first impressions and perceptions of professors have the potential to facilitate college undergraduate student motivation, course involvement, and student success.

Selected References

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- Thompson, B. (2007). The syllabus as a communication document: Constructing and presenting the syllabus. *Communication Education*, 56(1), 54-71.
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