



## Dialogue about Syllabus for Education of Research Methods in Journalism and Communication: A Contract, a Plan, a Cognitive Map, or a Communication Device?

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### Abstract

This study explores how the teaching of research methods in journalism and communication is embodied through syllabi in U.S. classrooms. Through emails and an online search, this study collects and reviews syllabi from the 102 accredited programs by Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. Based on four major distinct purposes of a syllabus—as a contract, a communication device, a plan, and a cognitive map—we examined the current education status of research methods courses and identified strategies of using syllabi as a learner-centered tool which can empower students to be motivated and self-directed learners.

A syllabus is an educational tool with essential functions for instructors to plan and for students to navigate, a course. It reflects the pedagogy being used, as well as the assumptions that instructors have about the course content, their own identities, and students (S.B. Fink, 2012). A sample review of the existing syllabi and evaluation of the content is critical to provide accurate and reliable descriptions of the quality of course. Syllabi review is also helpful to identify the possible disparities between syllabus content and course implementation, as well as between the goal of instructors and the learning outcomes of students.

Scholars have explored different approaches and best practices of syllabus design and content development as a pedagogical practice in general (Jones, 2018; Slattery & Carlson, 2005; Stanny *et al.*, 2015). Previous studies have discussed operational course norms

and the syllabi analysis in fields such as information literacy, linguistics, psychology, and social work (Becker & Calhoun, 1999; Drisko, 2008; Jones, 2018; Maybee *et al.*, 2015). The research methods course is a critical component for journalism and mass communication education (Lu, 2007). The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) recognizes the ability to “apply critical thinking skills in conducting research and evaluating information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work” as one of the core professional competencies (ACEJMC, n.d.). Scholars have recognized the importance of research in news-making and developing deep thinking skills and explored the research methods education in both undergraduate and graduate journalism and mass communication programs (Bolding, 1996; Bowe

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et al., 2020; Fowler, 1986; Lu, 2007). Denham (2003) pointed out that studying research methods enhances journalism and mass communication students' ability to seek evidence before making assertions. However, there is scant scholarship focusing on syllabus design solely for research methods courses. Specifically, very few empirical studies on the research methods courses taught in accredited journalism and mass communication programs have been conducted. The ability to develop research questions and conduct research is critical for college students (Denham, 1996; Rancer et al., 2013). Instructors and educators need to understand how best to teach students about research methods and research designs. In addition, researchers have not focused on how instructors' individual background and experience impact the construction and perception of syllabi on the education of communication research methods. To address these gaps, this research analyzes data gathered through a content analysis of syllabi of research methods courses from the programs accredited by ACEJMC.

The research findings may help instructors determine the extent to which the syllabus objectives are being achieved and supported through instructors. It also aims to explore which are effective syllabi for research methods courses in the communications field (Habaneck, 2005), to cultivate collaboration among individual instructors, institutions, and other available resources, and to provide suggestions for curriculum development.

### Literature review

#### Theoretical Framework: The Role of Syllabus

Researchers have analyzed syllabi development and its relationship with educational and learning outcomes (Doolittle & Lusk, 2007). Existing literature focuses primarily on prescriptive discussions regarding what content should be included and what tone should be used (Habaneck, 2005; Parkes & Harris, 2002; Stanny et al., 2015). For example, Doolittle and Lusk (2007) focus on the syllabus components, including professor information, course information, grading information, and policy information, and point out similarity of syllabi components across institutions and genders. L. D. Fink (2003) developed a holistic framework of syllabus components, which include learning goals, teaching and learning activities, and feedback and assessment. The suggested content for syllabi includes professor information, course information, grading information, and policy information. However, in-

creasingly longer and longer syllabi, which are intended to be exhaustive and detailed as much as possible, have been found to have very little or no effect on the positive learning and teaching experience and outcomes (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014). As Nilson (2007) stated, "many students don't read them carefully or completely... All syllabi contain standard information of the type students seem to want to know, yet many students don't consult them" (p. 9).

Syllabi often serve potentially conflicting functions simultaneously and are interpreted and viewed differently (Thompson, 2007). Haghghi (2012) identified approaches of syllabus design as task-based syllabi, text-based syllabi, and content-based syllabi and suggested the approach of need-based syllabi. Scholars also have explored the role of a syllabus as a contract or accountability agreement between instructors and students (Davidson & Ambrose, 1994; Parkes & Harris, 2002), a plan and a permanent record (Becker & Calhoun, 1999; L. D. Fink, 2003), a learning tool and a cognitive map (Parkes & Harries, 2002), or a communication device to establish a positive learning environment (Collins, 1997).

*A contract:* Contractually oriented syllabi have been a dominant mindset in higher education (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014). Syllabus should be a contract between instructors and students, which includes enough and critical information regarding the responsibility of all the parties in the learning process (Habaneck, 2005). A variety of contract and policy-oriented information is suggested to be included in syllabi, such as expectations of instructors and students, and grading and grievance procedures. For example, Habaneck (2005) suggested that the syllabus is a vehicle to convey the accountability agreement between instructors and students, including critical information such as course outcomes, course materials, course schedule, expressions of respect for individuals, details about how to be successful in the course, and the instructor's enthusiasm for the content of the course. Also, Jenkins, Bugeja, & Barber (2014) found that restrictive course policies might positively impact the perceived instructor's competence. However, they also suggested that a lengthier and detailed content of course policies was not necessary to be more beneficial for students' performance. Other scholars have also criticized that contract-based syllabi contain defensive tones and languages and demotivate students to engage in the education processes. As Singham (2005) argued, "By

devising complex general rules to cope with any and all anticipated behavior, we tend to constrain, alienate, and dehumanize students, and we remove a great deal of the enjoyment from the learning experience” (p. 56).

*A plan and a permanent record:* The syllabus is also viewed as an overall plan of activities for a course (Tokatlı & Keşli, 2009). As Doolittle and Siudzinski (2010) stated, syllabus “construction represents a critical moment in an instructor’s curriculum/course development thought process” (p. 29). For administrators, the syllabus is a critical part of the teaching evaluation for the purpose of tenure and promotion. The information regarding course description, pre-requisites, textbook, assignments, and learning outcomes is always utilized for institutional purposes such as credit transfer, articulation agreements, curriculum planning, and accreditation (Abdous & He, 2008; Doolittle & Lusk, 2007; S. J. B. Fink, 2011). For instructors, the syllabus demonstrates their growth, development, and full course preparedness and teaching competence (Appleby, 1999; Parkes & Harris, 2002; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). A syllabus as a plan should include course mission and rationale, scope and depth, course strategy, goals, as well as a teaching philosophy and beliefs (Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Parkes & Harris, 2002). The laying out of timeline, requirements, and related explanations help both the instructor and students to mutually understand the expectations and goals as “a knowledge guide” as well as “a road map” (Doolittle & Lusk, 2007, p. 74). Also, information such as dates, number of credit hours, instructor of record name and rank, prerequisites, textbooks and other materials, course objectives and content, and assessment procedures is an important archival document for documentation, evaluation, and accreditation (S. B. Fink, 2012).

*A cognitive map and a learning tool:* A syllabus provides a course’s description, structure, and its correlation with other courses within the program and field (Afros & Schryer, 2009). It also reflects an instructor’s intention of education and the expected learning outcomes of the students. Matejka and Kurke (1994) argued that instructors should have a broader understanding of the course, as well as how the teaching and learning process during the course will contribute to the students’ intellectual journey. Cullen and Harris (2009) indicated that “the clear articulation

of learning outcomes and clear methods of assessing those outcomes is a fundamental requirement of learner-centered pedagogy” (p. 117). However, the crucial issue is the syllabus design is always managed by instructors, lacking the students’ input. Therefore, Stanny et al. (2015) pointed out a disconnect between “instructor goals and course design, with a different pattern for the two categories of learning outcomes” (p. 909). From the learners’ perspective, Fornaciari and Dean (2014) suggested that the syllabus design should integrate more positive and learning-oriented policy statements and associated rationales. They suggested that the syllabus language should be more encouraging rather than contractual and consequential. Also, Sulik and Keys (2014) suggested that syllabus serve as a tool for students’ socialization by establishing the student-instructor role, constructing the learning environment, and immersing students into the discipline and practice of the field. Overall, a syllabus as a cognitive map and a learning tool that focuses on what students will gain from the course and how they will receive feedback about their progress. Focusing on how the information provided by a syllabus can equip students with the professional skills and learning motivations both within and beyond classrooms, an encouraging tone and language style is vital for the learning effectiveness.

*A communication device and a tool for socialization:* A syllabus mediates the interaction both between students and instructors and between instructors and their colleagues. It is the first step to build a collaborative system of teaching and learning. It is the first impression that student can have about the course and the instructor. It is also the opportunity for instructors to initiate dialogue with students. Recent studies have explored the role of syllabi to facilitate collaboration and the approach to include students in the process of syllabi design. However, a gap still exists regarding the scholarly discussion and the practice in reality.

Understanding a syllabus as a communication device focuses on the actual construction of syllabi such as verbal strategies, font size, length, level of detail, and nonverbal and subtle messages. Scholars suggest that a warm and inviting linguistic tone can help students feel more engaged and encourage and motivate students rather than merely attempting to prevent problems (Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). Syllabi play a role in the classroom socialization process, not only telling students what

is due, but also what to do, and what roles are available to them (Danielson, 1995). Harnish and Bridges (2011) identified the characteristics of a positive and friendly syllabus tone, which includes:

- (1) using positive or friendly language; (2) providing a rationale for assignments; (3) sharing personal experiences; (4) using humor; (5) conveying compassion; and (6) showing enthusiasm for the course (p. 321).

Grunert (2008) suggested the communicative element of syllabus design should be based on communication between instructors and students regarding learning outcomes and transparent methods of assessing those outcomes. Also, the prescriptive studies suggest that a warm and inviting linguistic tone can help students feel more engaged and encourage and motivate students rather than merely attempting to prevent problems (Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Slattery & Carlson, 2005). However, the syllabus is not always communicated very well and effectively. Habanek (2005) found the mismatch between the recommendations of critical information that should be includ-

ed and the syllabi she examines.

Overall, scholars suggested content, tone, and instructor’s intent are all critical components of a syllabus (Collins, 1997; Habanek, 2005; Parkes & Harris, 2002). More important, an inclusive, conversational, and collaborative syllabus is more effective for students’ learning outcome because students are viewed as active learners rather than passive receivers (Chen et al., 2001). Based on the above literature, a theoretical framework for the current research is developed, which is presented in Table 1.

The framework of Table 1 will guide the current research, which categorizes the four types of syllabus functions. Although there is some general information that is provided by each syllabus, there are also distinctions regarding the suggested content and language style among these four types. The contract-based syllabus emphasizes the policies and responsibilities of each party, normally adopting defensive tones and consequential languages. For the documentation and accreditation purpose, a syllabus as a plan and permanent record always includes detailed information

**Table 1 Functions and Associated Content of a Syllabus**

	<i>Contract</i>	<i>Plan and permanent record</i>	<i>Cognitive map</i>	<i>Communication device</i>
<i>Suggested content</i>	Clear and accurate course calendar	Title and date(s) of course	Planning and self-management skills	Assignment rationale
	Grading policies: components & weights	Department offering the course	Time to spend outside of class	Personal experiences
	Attendance policy	Credit hours earned	Tips on how to do well on assessments	Inclusive language
	Late assignment policy	Title and rank of instructor(s)	Common misconceptions or mistakes	Choices of assignments
	Make-up exam policy	Pre- or co-requisites	Specific study strategies	Positive environment
	Policies on incompletes and revisions	Required texts and other materials	Availability of instructor(s) and teacher assistants	Teaching philosophy
	Academic dishonesty policy	Course objectives, linked to professional standards	Campus resources for assistance	
	Academic freedom policy	Description of course content	Offices that aid students with disabilities	
	Accommodation of disabilities policy	Description of assessment procedures	Relevance and importance of the course to students	
		Professional standards	A model of high-quality work	
<i>Language</i>	Defensive, consequential	Detailed and cohesive	Encouraging	Inclusive and conversational

Source: Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Parkes & Harris, 2002; Thompson, 2007

about the course materials, instructor of record, and the department offering the course. In contrast, a syllabus as a cognitive map and learning tool focuses on the learning effectiveness, demonstrating the understanding of the students' needs and the relevance of this course to students and adopting the encouraging language. Finally, a syllabus as a communication device views the teaching and learning as a collaborative process and uses language that is more inclusive and conversational.

### Syllabi Design and Impacting Factors

Despite the extensive literature on best practices and functions of syllabi, there has been less scholarly attention to the impacting factors on syllabus design and construction. It is true that the construction of syllabi is constrained by institutional policies. However, instructors' discretion to create and communicate their syllabi has been neglected. Instructors make choices when developing their courses and syllabi. Their enthusiasm and commitment are reflected through their syllabi design. Current research has focused extensively on class content, teaching methods, and communication requirements. Besides the above literature, there has been scant literature that explores the relationship between the syllabi design and the instructors' characteristics. Specifically, how the instructors' gender, cultural background, and rank influence their syllabi design purpose has not been fully understood. A systematic review of the current syllabi and instructors will be helpful in understanding the current curriculum development and education of communication research methods.

### Education of Research Methods Courses

As mentioned above, there has been scant studies on the syllabi of research methods courses, especially in the communication field. Scholars have discussed the relationship between the syllabi of different courses and research skills and the competence of students such as information literacy (East, 2005; Maybee *et al.*, 2015). Earley (2007) reflected his own course design of a mixed-methods course and highlighted the current situation that was lacking resources and official training regarding the teaching process. In the journalism and mass communication field, research methods have been seen as the foundational as well as the most difficult course to teach at the undergraduate level (Denham, 1996). Earlier scholars such as Fowler (1986) claimed that research methods courses

could better prepare both undergraduate and graduate students to be media employees, researchers, and practitioners in various areas. Some studies have discussed the teaching strategy of math courses for journalism and mass communication students (Cusatis & Martin-Kratzer, 2008; Maier & Curtin, 2004). For example, Maier and Curtin (2004) suggested the self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes the students' self-interest and their recognition of self-capability, as well as an engaged learning environment, is fundamental for effective math learning. Also, Rancer *et al.* (2013) suggested that instructors should consider administering and measuring students' math anxiety to help them understand concepts and procedures such as correlations, ANOVAs, t-tests, and significance levels.

Also, scholars have provided suggestions regarding the effective teaching of mass communication research methods. For example, Parks, Faw, and Goldsmith (2011) identified the existing issues in current empirical methods education, such as the narrower and larger methods classes and more focus on quantitative methods. Lu (2007) examined the research methods syllabi of doctoral mass communication programs in the United States. Her research found the relationship between rank, gender, and quantitative and qualitative methods. She stated that quantitative methods courses had more male and tenured instructors, while qualitative methods courses have more female and non-tenured instructors.

Generally, the above literature suggested the critical role that syllabi can play in the education and learning process. Both the content and tone are relevant to the perceived instructors' effectiveness and students' learning outcome. Although scholars have suggested an engaging, inclusive, and learner-centered syllabus can be beneficial and critical for the students' learning outcome (Chen *et al.*, 2001; Cullen & Harris, 2009; Earley, 2014), the review of the existing literature reveals that very little is known about the role of the syllabus in the education-learning process for research methods courses at ACEJMC-accredited journalism and communication programs. As Cullen and Harris (2009) stated, "A syllabus is more than an outline of a course. It represents the mindset that is the professor's philosophy of teaching and learning as well as his or her attitude towards students, and conceptualization of the course" (p. 117). In other words, a syllabus reflects the power relations between the instructor and students during the teaching-learning process. A sys-

tematic analysis of syllabi will be critical to facilitate a better understanding of faculty expectations for the education outcomes, which in turn could be used to inform journalism and communication programs for their curriculum development. It is also helpful for

the establishment of a learner-centered education environment and effective learning outcomes. Therefore, the research is guided by the following questions:

- What content is covered in the syllabi of research methods courses in the field of journalism and

**Table 2: Study Operationalization**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
Course level	1. Lower; 2. Upper; 3. Master level; 4. Doctoral level; 0. Don't know	Lower: 100(0)-299(9), JMC 136 (Syllabus #120) Upper: 300(0)-499(9), JRN 369 (Syllabus #168) Master: 500(0)-699(9), JOUR 5043 (Syllabus #024) Doctoral: 700(0)-999(9), JRSM 7080 (Syllabus #312);
Course approach	1. In-person; 2. Online; 3. Hybrid	This asynchronous course meets entirely online, meaning students are responsible for managing their time and attention to course materials (Online- Syllabus #088) This class is a hybrid class, with some of the work done online on your own time. You must have both Internet access and a computer capable of connecting to Blackboard (Hybrid- Syllabus #142)
Methods	1. Quantitative; 2. Qualitative; 3. Mixed	J5043/4943H introduces you to the basic process of quantitative and qualitative scientific research in journalism and mass communication, whether industry or academic. Qualitative research is introduced but to a lesser extent than quantitative research (Mixed- Syllabus #024)
Syllabus function	1. Contract; 2. Plan and permanent record; 3. Cognitive map and learning tool; 4. Communication	Instructors are solely responsible for determining whether provisions will be made for unforeseen circumstances. You must report these circumstances as soon as possible after the event. You may be required to produce documentation. (Contract- Syllabus #241)
Instructor's gender	1. Female; 2. Male; 0. Unknown	From names and program websites
Instructor educational background	1. Ph.D.; 2. Master; 3. Bachelor; 0. Unknown	From the instructor's CV, websites of programs and individuals
Instructor position designation	1. Professor; 2. Assoc. professor; 3. Asst. professor; 4. Adjunct/instructor; 0. other	From program websites
Instructor racial	1. American Indian or Alaska Native; 2. Asian; 3. Black or African American; 4. White (include Hispanic or Latino)	From the instructor's CV, websites of programs and individuals

mass communication?

- What is the role of syllabi in the learning and education process for research methods courses in the field of journalism and mass communication?
- What factors impact the construction of syllabi for research methods courses in the field of journalism and mass communication?

### Research Design

To address the research questions, this research employed a content analysis approach to determine the content of research methods that was covered, textbooks and materials, assignments, as well as the instructors' information. Content analysis is defined as "a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding" (Stemler, 2001). It allows researchers to draw inferences about the collected data.

**Data Collection:** Based on the list of 102 accredited programs by ACEJMC, research methods courses and the faculty members that were teaching these classes were identified via institutional websites. Faculty members in these 102 programs were contacted via emails and asked to provide electronic copies of their syllabi. Emails were sent to the program directors or chairs when a faculty member's information was not available. It is worthwhile to note that syllabi of 12 programs were accessible from the website. Two programs had online syllabus archives but only open to internal users. Also, two syllabi were downloaded directly from the individual instructors' webpages. Overall, syllabi were collected from 45 programs (44%), and 112 syllabi were analyzed.

**Data Analysis:** A qualitative content analysis of the collected syllabi was conducted based on the framework of contract, plan, cognitive map, and communicative device. Through an initial reading of the syllabi, a comprehensive list of all the relevant elements (Comeaux *et al.*, 2015) was developed. The two researchers first read the collected syllabi and develop a tentative coding sheet separately. Then, a revised coding sheet and scheme was designed. A coding system was developed to evaluate the syllabi, which includes variables such as course level, methods, and content modules. The information regarding instructors' gender, education, rank, and race were also coded by looking up the programs' websites. Table 2 (previous page) reveals the coded categories. Specifically, Table 3 (next page) indicates the operational definitions for

the main coding category: syllabus' function and role.

### Findings

#### General Characteristics of Syllabi

Of the 112 syllabi reviewed, more than half of syllabi (75/112, 67%) did not specify either quantitative or qualitative methods, or covered both; 21 out of 112 syllabi (18.8%) were for a quantitative course, while 18 (14.3%) were for a qualitative method course. There was some consistency in the structures of both syllabi and courses. For example, most had similar structures, including course description (90; 80%), course objective (77; 69%), weekly schedule (100; 89%), and policies of dishonesty, grading, and grievance (82; 73.2%). Also, the students' assessment was based mostly on a research paper (108; 96.4%), class participation (103; 92%), and exams (72; 64.3%). Table 4 shows the course level distribution.

On average, each syllabus had at least one major assigned textbook, with considerable variance. The most common major readings were *The Basics of Communication Research* by Babbie (2017) or the earlier versions (15; 13%) and *Mass Media research* by Wimmer & Dominick (2014) (12; 11%). As previously mentioned, 67% of syllabi did not have specified quantitative or qualitative methods. To better understand the covered topics, the researchers conducted a word frequency search throughout all of the syllabi content by using the software MAXQDA. The keywords and terms were selected based on the main research methods in the mass communication field. The result was in Figure 1 below. In addition, table 5 indicates the number of syllabi mentioning each topic.

Interestingly, 11 of the 112 syllabi included visual images such as cartoons, instructor's personal photos,

Figure 1 Main Topics Covered by Syllabi



textbook covers, and symbols of research software. Ten syllabi included quotes from various resources. For example, syllabus #068 started with a quote, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts. – Attributed to Albert Einstein.” Although these were not generally adopted strategies, the innovative construction of the syllabus might be more effective in engaging with students who were born and grew in the digital and visual age.

On average, each syllabus had at least one major assigned textbook, with considerable variance. The most common major readings were *The Basics of Communication Research* by Babbie (2017) or the

**Table 4 Course Level of Research Methods Classes (n=112)**

Course Level	Frequency	Percent (%)
Undergraduate Lower level	4	3.6
Undergraduate Upper level	55	49.1
Master	41	36.6
Doctoral	12	10.7
Total	112	100

earlier versions (15; 13%) and *Mass Media research* by Wimmer & Dominick (2014) (12; 11%). As previously mentioned, 67% of syllabi did not have specified quantitative or qualitative methods. To better understand the covered topics, the researchers conducted a

**Table 3 Syllabus Function and Role**

Syllabus function	Characteristics	Examples
<b>Contract</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsibilities of each party</li> <li>Policy-oriented</li> <li>Grading and grievance procedure</li> <li>Defensive tone and consequential language</li> </ol>	<p>If you fail to meet ANY of these criteria, you will not be allowed to make-up the exam. Do not ask... you <b>WILL NOT BE THE EXCEPTION.</b> (Syllabus #168)</p> <p>The professor reserves the right to change the schedule. (Syllabus #312)</p>
<b>Plan and permanent record</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Timeline</li> <li>Requirement and explanation</li> <li>Information of the instructor’s name, rank</li> <li>Prerequisites</li> <li>Information of department or program</li> <li>Detailed and cohesive language</li> </ol>	<p>There will be three exams given over the course of the semester, each corresponding to one of the three units of the class. Each exam will cover approximately one-third of the course material. The format for the exams may include a combination of any/all of the following: multiple choice, true-false, fill-in-the-blank, matching, short answer, or essay. Exams will cover material from lectures and the text. Exams will not be cumulative in the strict sense. However, learning is cumulative, and that is especially true in a research class. (Syllabus #003)</p>
<b>Cognitive map</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Correlation with other courses</li> <li>Importance for students</li> <li>Knowledge in the field</li> <li>Encouraging language</li> </ol>	<p>As an ACEJMC accredited program, the Department of Mass Media uses the ACEJMC core values and competencies in its curriculum. The values and competencies are listed below and the ones applicable in MC 301 are identified (Syllabus #195)</p>
<b>Communication device</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching philosophy</li> <li>Positive environment</li> <li>Personal experience</li> <li>Assignment rationale</li> <li>Flexibility and integration of students’ input</li> <li>Inclusive and conversational language</li> </ol>	<p>My philosophy of teaching this course is ultimately to facilitate your efforts in becoming communication researchers—how this occurs is dependent on your needs, feedback, and input. I encourage your input as we journey through the course, and I am open to making changes to best suit the class dynamics and challenge your learning in this course. Some of the material we cover is difficult, but do not hesitate to ask questions or meet with the instructor to facilitate your success in the course. (Syllabus #214)</p>



word frequency search throughout all of the syllabi content by using the software MAXQDA. The keywords and terms were selected based on the main research methods in the mass communication field. The result was in Figure 1 below. In addition, table 5 indicates the number of syllabi mentioning each topic.

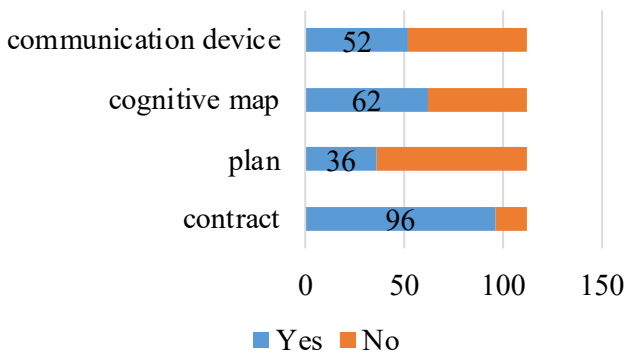
Interestingly, 11 of the 112 syllabi included visual images such as cartoons, instructor’s personal photos, textbook covers, and symbols of research software. Ten syllabi included quotes from various resources. For example, syllabus #068 started with a quote, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts. – Attributed to Albert Einstein.” Although these were not generally adopted strategies, the innovative construction of the syllabus might be more effective in engaging with students who were born and grew in the digital and visual age.

**Function and Role of Syllabi**

Based on the definition and the characteristics that have been identified, the categories of syllabi’ function were shown in Figure 2. For example, among the 112 syllabi, 96 were categorized as having the function of contract, while 52 of them were categorized as having the function of communication device. It has to be noted that the four types of functions are not exclusive of each other. For example, a syllabus can simultaneously have contract-based content such as policies and grading rubrics, as well as the encouraging and welcoming tone that establishes a positive learning environment. As scholars suggested, instructors should balance being caring and friendly and the attitude of being serious and task-oriented (Baecker, 1998; DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Singham, 2005).

Therefore, first, syllabus should be a contract between instructor and students to ensure accountability

**Figure 2 Function of Syllabi**



**Table 5 Topics Covered in Syllabi (n=112)**

Topic	# of syllabi mentioning topic	% of syllabi mentioning topic
survey	82	73%
qualitative	80	71%
quantitative	80	71%
ethics	74	66%
interview	61	54%
experiment	60	54%
statistics	56	50%
literature review	52	46%
focus group	51	46%
content analysis	47	42%
digital media	37	33%
hypothesis	32	29%
SPSS	29	26%
ethnography	23	21%
paradigm	23	21%
rhetorical and critical analysis	6	5%

ty along with the policies, rules, and expectations from both instructors and students (Davidson & Ambrose, 1994; L. D. Fink, 2003; Parkes & Harris, 2002). Most of the syllabi contain a statement such as “The instructor will make every effort to follow the guidelines of this syllabus as listed; however, the instructor reserves the right to amend this document as the need arises (Syllabus #003). However, among the 151 statements of responsibilities, only 25 statements were about instructors’ or universities’ responsibilities. Most of the 25 statements were about the responsibilities of both instructors and students. Only one syllabus had the sections clearly labeled as “Instructor’s Responsibility” and “Student’s Responsibility” (Syllabus #314).

Besides setting up the accountability document between the instructor and students, the course syllabus can also be an archival document for documentation, evaluation, and accreditation. As scholars have argued, the perception of syllabus as a plan and a permanent record might be more beneficial for instructors, administrators, and accrediting organizations rather than students. However, our analysis found that 32% of the syllabi were categorized as plans and permanent documents. For example, 32 syllabi (29%) include the information regarding prerequisites and the course’s relationship with other courses, while 38

syllabi (34%) provide information regarding the parent departments and schools.

Compared to the function as a plan or permanent record which focuses on instructors, administrators, and accrediting bodies, the function of a cognitive map emphasizes a student-centered approach and students' learning outcomes. The integration of information such as how and where to get assistance and course materials, knowledge of the field, and the course's importance immerse students into the discipline and practice of journalism and mass communication field. For example, statements such as "This practical experience will be beneficial both in future courses you take in the CJC, but also in your professional careers (Syllabus #087)," not only highlighted the course's important for students but also encouraged students to be more motivated. Also, although only 16 syllabi (14%) mentioned the ACEJMC core values and competencies which are closely related to course descriptions and objectives, most of the syllabi indicated a student-oriented perspective, providing explanation and rationales about student assessment. However, we noticed that although 82 syllabi (73%) provided grading scale, only 32 syllabi (29%) had grading rubric and interpretations regarding how to succeed with the specific course.

Regarding the tone and language, a big difference between syllabi as contracts and syllabi as learning tools can be found in the content of participation requirement. For example, contract-oriented syllabus stated that attendance and participation was required or mandatory, while learning-centered syllabus claimed that

This course depends on each participant for its energy and vitality! Students are expected to... actively participate in the class. Participation in class does not just mean talking! Good class participation involves coming to class on time with questions about the readings to share with the class, volunteering answers to questions that are insightful, actively listening to others' contribution to discussion, and moving the discussion along toward a shared understanding. (Syllabus #048)

The function of syllabus as a communication device focuses on the conversations and interactions between the instructor and the students. More importantly, it emphasizes a balanced power relationship by using inclusive and conversational language and inviting students into the decision-making process

regarding course design and assessment processes. Among the collected syllabi, 48 syllabi (43%) used inclusive language such as "we" rather than "the instructor" and "students." Nineteen syllabi (17%) included the instructors' personal experience and teaching philosophy. For example, the instructor of syllabus #089 stated that "I believe, and research has shown, that active participation in learning is crucial for long term learning. Most weeks we will complete at least one (or more) activity in class." Syllabus #133 also is an example of the conversational and positive environment that the instructor established. "I want each of you to succeed. I am here to help. If you have questions or difficulties in this course, please see me. I am more than happy to work with you. If you wait until the end of the semester, you significantly reduce my chances to help you."

### Characteristics of Instructors

Although previous studies have identified some relationship between the course taught and the instructors' gender and rank, a series of SPSS regression analysis did not yield any significant relationship between the function of syllabi and the instructors' gender, education, rank, and race. Among the 112 syllabi, there was one syllabus that could not be identified regarding the instructor. Regarding the other instructors of the 111 syllabi, 57 were female (50.9%), and 54 were male (48.2%). Ninety-six had Ph.D. degrees (85.7%), and 13 had master degrees (11.6%). The instructors with master degrees included Ph.D. students who were teaching undergraduate courses as well as adjunct instructors. Below in Table 6 and Table 7 are the instructors' academic rank and race.

In terms of racial background, it must be noted that it is hard to identify the difference between White (Non-Hispanic or Latino) with Hispanic and Latino based on the instructors' information online. Therefore, these two groups were categorized together.

**Table 6 Rank of Instructors (n=112)**

Rank	Frequency	Percentage
Professor	26	23.2%
Associate Professor	27	24.1%
Assistant Professor	40	35.7%
Adjunct Faculty/Instructor	18	16.1%
Unknown	1	0.9%
Total	112	100%

**Table 7 Race of the Instructors (N=112)**

Race	Frequency	Percentage
White (including Hispanic & Latino)	85	75.9%
Asian	17	15.2%
Black or African American	5	4.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	1.8%
Unknown	3	2.7%
Total	112	100%

er. Further differentiation is needed when a survey or in-depth interviews are conducted.

### Discussion

The existing literature has discussed how syllabi could play a more critical role in the education and learning process in higher education. Syllabi provide the first impression of the instructor and the course and therefore impacts the teaching-learning process. The findings of the current study concurred with previous research which demonstrated a dominant mind-set of rule and contract-based perception of syllabus. However, our findings also suggest some best practices, even a paradigm shift regarding research methods education in the field of journalism and mass communication. In terms of the research questions, the research findings provide the following discussions and related implications.

#### Current Status of Research Methods Education

Regarding the first research question, previous literature has identified the emphasis on quantitative methods and less attention to qualitative methods. However, this research found that no matter the courses that solely focus on specific types of methods or the content within the syllabus, there was a relative balance between quantitative and qualitative methods. The covered topics included a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative methods such as statistics, survey, experiment, meta-analysis, in-depth interview, focus group, and field study. As a field that emphasizes empirical application of learned knowledge and skills, the course objectives can be categorized as two main types: (1) foundational knowledge such as facts, concepts, definitions, perspectives such as creative and critical thinking; (2) applicable skills such as the application of theories, methods, and technologies to address real-world problems. However, throughout all the syllabi, we have found a gap between the course objectives and the students' assessments. The

content of students' assessments focused on detailed instructions such as due dates, font, size, length, format, etc. Most of the syllabi did not provide either the detailed information about the assignments and rubric or explanation about the assessment rationale, especially the relationship with the course objectives.

#### Effective Strategies of Research Methods Education

Scholars have suggested that a friendly, warm, and conversational tone of a syllabus would indicate a more accessible instructor who motivates students to learn (Harnish & Bridges, 2011). Our research found that although most syllabi indicated a contract-based perception regarding the function of syllabus, there have been some best practices regarding syllabus as a cognitive map and a communication device, fostering a positive and engaging teaching-learning environment. For example, the integration of instructors' personal experience and teaching philosophy provides an opportunity for students to understand the instructor. Jones (2018) suggests involving students in the process of syllabus design. A certain extent of flexibility might be another strategy that can be adopted by more syllabi. For example, Syllabus #195 stated that, "...I consider myself flexible in dealing with individual student situations and needs. If something is happening that is limiting your ability to succeed in the class, please come talk to me. Together we can work out a plan to get you to a successful outcome. These plans may involve different deadlines and requirements, as long as the core learning objectives are still achieved at a proficient level.

Also, with the increasing adoption of information technology in higher education, some instructors have started exploring the integration of online platforms into syllabus design. Therefore, the syllabus can be general guidance with the integration of syllabus with online resources such as Canvas and hyperlinks.

In terms of motivating students to learn, and in connection with the above discussion of the lack of information regarding assessment rationale in relation to the course objectives, instructors might want to highlight how research methods can be integrated into daily practice and help journalists produce high-quality news stories. Specific examples can be provided regarding how rigorous research methods have been used to create successful news stories. As Ni-

block (2007) suggested, journalism should be viewed as research-in-practice, especially with the prevalence of citizen journalism within a rapidly changing media environment. Research skills and knowledge are significantly salient for professional journalists. The embeddedness of research into the discipline and profession of journalism and mass communication might significantly motivate students' study interest.

### **Impacting Factors**

The current research was not able to find a significant relationship between syllabi function and instructors' characteristics such as gender, rank, and race. A possible explanation is that the similarity of syllabus structure, especially the high similarity of syllabus content from the same institute, indicates the institutional impact. All of the universities provided syllabus templates and suggestions on modules that have to be covered, such as diversity policies and academic policies. This type of content has taken a large portion of syllabus content, with much little impact on students' learning. An alternative strategy is to separate the institutional policies into a separate document such as student handbook. Each syllabus does not need to include the same content repetitively. Therefore, more space can be used for the content that focuses on students learning of the specific course materials.

### **Limitation and Further Research**

The current research has several limitations that must be noted. First, although the researchers attempted to contact all the ACEJMC accredited programs, it is necessary to point out that the collected syllabi were not received from all the programs, which might not be able to be representative of the overall field of journalism and mass communication education. Second, this research did not take institutional impacts into consideration. In reality, each university has clear guidelines regarding syllabus design and development. As we mentioned in the discussion, we have seen similarities regarding the syllabi from the same institution. Further research should include factors such as institutions' type, location, size, and other characteristics to examine the institutional impact on syllabus function. Third, the research data was collected mostly based on content analysis of course syllabi, lacking the understanding of perceptions of both instructors and students. The current approach might

limit the findings regarding the impacting factors such as instructors' gender, rank, and race. More diverse research methods such as experiments, surveys, and in-depth interviews with both instructors and students will be helpful to attain a more comprehensive picture of the perception of the syllabus' role, as well as to fill the gap between instructors' intention and students' learning outcome. For example, experimental research might be helpful to see which kind of syllabus would be more effective to encourage the student to read and learn.

### **Conclusion**

A syllabus symbolizes instructor-student expectations regarding classroom and course conduct and also provides a description of the course content. Historically, the syllabus has changed from a brief list of assignments to a complex document that includes essential course information. The literature highlights the critical role of a syllabus for students' learning outcomes. In the journalism and mass communication field, research methods are important not only for graduate students' academic research but also for undergraduate students to be media practitioners and employees in reality. Our research provides implications and suggestions for instructors as well as institutes regarding how to effectively use syllabi as a good starting point and a critical component for students' journeys in both colleges as well as practical careers. Regarding the syllabus content, a clear connection between the core values and competence of ACEJMC with the students' assessment, as well as the highlight of the career development with the research methods courses will be beneficial for students to be more motivated in the learning process. From a learner-centered perspective, although restrictive course policies might be important to establish the instructor's competence and authority, an encouraging and engaging tone can help convey the same content with a more positive perception of the instructor as well as the course. The strategies include the integration of the instructors' personal experience and teaching philosophy, as well as quotes and visual images. Also, with the increasing adoption of information technology in higher education, syllabi can be a cognitive map for students to explore the discipline and course materials with collaboration with online platforms.

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