Establishing Expectations: How good is your Syllabus?
by Dr. Susan Mossing, CETL Associate Director

College is different than high school. One of the big differences is that students have to take responsibility for their own learning. Typically on the first day of class, professors communicate their expectations and course requirements via their syllabus and then begin their job of facilitating student learning.

Here at the Center, we try to equip students with the study skills and habits that will help them assume that responsibility. We start by helping them understand your expectations; we begin by analyzing your syllabus. To help students with this task of analyzing the syllabus I developed a Course Information Sheet (CIS).

Students come to the Center with a syllabus in hand (or a device that can access the syllabus online) and sit down to begin the process. It used to surprise us that so many students never read the syllabus. They didn't know how you would be calculating their grade—the effect that attendance had on their grade, the value of papers, quizzes and tests, and even that they had online assignments due each week. We've come to expect naïve students now; it's simply a big part of our job of educating our students.

In helping students understand your expectations, we have seen a wide variety of syllabi from just about every department on campus. They are very different. Some are 1-2 pages long and others are pushing 20. Some include learning objectives and required textbooks, as requested by the Provost’s office each semester. Some include a reference to the M Book for academic dis/honesty and the disability access statement provided by Student Disabilities Services. Some clearly outline course requirements, due dates, policies on attendance and missed assignments and/or tests. And some don’t.

Over several years of helping students complete their CISs, we have become experts in the business of analyzing syllabi and can use that expertise to help you avoid mistakes and omissions. We can help you create a solid document that clearly outlines to students what you expect of them and what they can expect of you. Toward that end, we have posted a template online as well as a listing of what should be included in a syllabus. We are also available to meet with you if you would like to discuss your specific syllabus or issues associated with it.

Let us help you help our students. We hope to hear from you soon.

Learning Assumptions
by Dr. Nancy Wiggers, Learning Specialist

On a surface level, instructors and students use assessments to measure learning for a given period of time. Underneath it all, however, are sometimes
By early next week, eating pressure will be low as the warming trend where soup develops. Flurries of leftovers can be expected both days with a 50 percent chance of scattered soup late in the day. We expect a severe squall or cold shoulder.

Looking ahead to Friday and Saturday, high pressure to eat sandwiches will be established. Flurries of leftovers can be expected both days with a 50 percent chance of scattered soup late in the day. We expect a warming trend where soup develops. By early next week, eating pressure will be low as the only wish left will be the bone.

(Author unknown)
Unforgettable Thanksgiving
The turkey shot out the oven, 
And rocketed into the air;  
It knocked every plate off the table,  
And partly demolished a chair. 
It ricocheted into a corner 
And burst with a deafening boom,  
Then splattered all over the kitchen,  
Completely obscuring the room. 
It stuck to the walls and the windows, 
It totally coated the floor, 
There was turkey attached to the ceiling,  
Where there’d never been turkey before. 
It blanketed every appliance, 
It smeared every saucer and bowl,  
There wasn’t a way I could stop it,  
That turkey was out of control! 
I scraped and I scrubbed with displeasure, 
And thought with chagrin as I mopped,  
That I’d never again stuff a turkey,  
With popcorn that hadn’t been popped.  

(Author unknown)

Tools to Incorporate into the Classroom
by Ms. Rebekah Reysen, M.Ed., Learning Specialist

Instructors often ask us how to help students succeed in the classroom. There are many pedagogical techniques and learning strategies that instructors can incorporate into the classroom. An effective way to teach these skills is to model the particular studying strategies and behaviors that students are expected to replicate. This modeling process works well with rubrics, mind maps and charts as outlined below.

Rubrics are used to evaluate essays, projects and other assignments. They not only help the student understand the specifics of how they will be graded; rubrics also help students begin to understand how quality work is defined at the collegiate level. Issues to be addressed in rubrics include: quality of organization, content and thoroughness of information presented. Once students begin to look at their work in terms of specific requirements, they can begin to evaluate their own work in future courses as well. Rubrics also help instructors explain to students exactly why they received the grades that they did, which can be the catalyst for valuable discussions about areas of strength as well as areas for growth.

Mind maps help students organize their thoughts, papers, essays and projects. Mind maps are exactly that – a way to visually organize and display pertinent information. In my Freshmen Experience Course, EDHE 105, we are currently mind mapping the characters of Tom Franklin’s novel Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter. The mind mapping process allows students the opportunity to keep track of characters and events in the novel as well as see how these characters and events are related to one another. Mind maps help students become active learners.

In addition to rubrics and mind maps, charts are also a valuable tool that instructors and students can utilize both in and out of the classroom. Charts can be created for the purpose of helping students compare and contrast more complex information. Creating a chart in front of students and “thinking aloud” as you do so is a great modeling exercise.

There are many other tools that instructors can implement to help their students. If you are interested in learning more about specific classroom tools, please contact us here at the Center. We can help you with other topics as well, such as how to teach reading or note-taking strategies.

This newsletter is created and distributed by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.