



## **The Graphic Syllabus and the Outcomes Map: Communicating Your Course**

Linda B Nilson; Jossey-Bass, 2007.

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Linda Nilson's *The Graphic Syllabus and the Outcomes Map: Communicating Your Course* is an accessible, engaging, and thorough investigation of the use of graphic syllabi and outcome maps to engage students. Nilson's newest book is a text grounded in theory and practice and one that explains itself well.

Nilson outlines the problems associated with text syllabus: students do not read them, they find their language confusing, and, as a general rule, syllabi make little sense to them. Covering essential course information, reading lists, books to purchase, professor contacts, university policy, and more, Nilson suggests that nowadays syllabi seem to have more in common with legal documents than they do with academic learning. She asks a fundamental question: What do documents like this tell students about what they will learn and how they will learn it? Nilson contends that such syllabi only provide the "skeleton" of a course, falling short of answering basic questions about learning outcomes and the rationale that underscores the actual selection and delivery of course content. Simply put, the text syllabus does not reveal all the work, organization, planning, and concepts that have guided an instructor's organization of the course, and failure to share that with students does them a disservice. She contends that many syllabi are formulaic and gives us "Course BLAH 300: Something I Gotta' Take: Week One: Overview of Something I Gotta' Take, Week Two: The Composition of an Orange Peel, Week Three: Introduction to Giraffe Consciousness" and so on. This example stands as a humorous and all too real picture of how mechanical the syllabus can be and, most likely, is for students. Furthermore, her examples and her argument demonstrate how disconnected academic language appears to students, making her case more compelling.

But why should we create a graphic syllabus? Why not just connect the dots and put that in a list or explain it in class? To convince the reader that a graphic syllabus is a more effective tool than a text driven one, Nilson explores the connections between graphics and learning. Her argument that we have become more of a visual society is hard to contest (there are pictures of sodas and hamburgers on the cash register's at McDonalds and some sets of instructions that come with IKEA-type furniture have no words at all.) As such, shouldn't a syllabus reflect this change? As a rhetorician, I found this argument telling: Nilson suggests that faculty actually consider their audience, and, as Aristotle would have suggested, use their available means of persuasion. But that alone is not the only reason to consider using a graphic syllabus. Nilson goes on to discuss why graphic organization is more effective than text based organization. Quoting from numerous studies and researchers in the field of cognition from 1971 to 2005, she presents the connections between graphic understanding and the mind. Including essentials such as the concept map and the mind map in her analysis, she explains how "graphics facilitate learning" by allowing students to "dual-code" their learning into separate verbal and visual-spatial cognitive settings. Brain science has told us that when memory is stored in this fashion (called dual-coding), the learner stands better chance of retaining it. In addition, graphics are more efficient as "they require less working memory and fewer cognitive transformations than text." Nilson's well-researched, logical argument suggests that students, often "novices with little prior knowledge and disciplinary language," fail to understand the picture of the course as a whole. Not

only is the larger picture missing, but students are also unable to assemble the small bits we have in our weekly listings. The "patterns, generalizations, abstractions, and algorithms" that underscore our thinking and make perfect sense to us as experts are foreign to them. The argument she presents is thorough and convincing. Once Nilson has made her case, she provides numerous examples of the graphic syllabus and provides suggestions for creating one.

Nilson proposes several possible organizational strategies for creating the graphic syllabus. First is examining the course organization; next is making connections between topics; finally, comes determining an organizational pattern, which she likens to writing the story of the course. For instance, some courses topics are complementary while some are in competition; this organization framework would allow an instructor to mirror theories in a pro and con style debate. Some topics may need to be presented in a parallel fashion while others may be best as a process. Still others are more linear, showing a series of events within a particular time frame and many may need a more hierarchical presentation. Once the basic organization of the course has been established, the task becomes "how to arrange the information spatially, both overall and in specific areas of the graphic." The use of arrows, directions, boxes, and images can amplify the course's organization and demonstrate the interconnectivity of the course material. Nilson, however, warns her readers to avoid using too many bells and whistles. While using many multiple colors, rectangles and dingbats may be fun, they will not clarify the syllabus and the course content. To resist these urges, Nilson suggests that readers use a "graphic metaphor" as a controlling force within the syllabus. Such a metaphor could be a floor plan (each lesson is a room), an ecological system (lessons interact with each other and show their interdependency), an exploded mechanical description (the separate parts are all seen in relationship to each other), or a four-course dinner (beginning with an appetizer and ending with coffee and brandy).

In "Charting the Outcomes Map," Nilson defines it as "a flowchart of the student learning objectives." But to create such a chart faculty must first write learning objectives-an easy task for some and a more difficult task for others. Most college professors are subject matter experts with little to no experience in classroom pedagogy; consequently, the task of writing clear, attainable learning objectives may be a challenge. To be sure one learns this ability over the course of a teaching career, but Nilson's guide is helpful and provides essential breakdowns of different types of objectives (ultimate, mediating, foundational) as well as providing frameworks in which to place them (Bloom's taxonomy, including the Anderson and Krathwohl revision; Perry's 1968 Harvard studies; Fink's significant learning theory). Following the theoretical underpinnings, Nilson provides numerous examples of outcomes maps. The final chapter of this book describes how the organizational patterns and development that she has argued for may benefit the instructor's pedagogy and the students' learning. She suggests that creating graphic syllabi can offer instructors an opportunity to rethink their courses in new and inventive ways, and many of those she has worked with find the process liberating and creative. "In the end they all had fun-the kind of fun that accrues from a creative activity that blends the mental with the emotional, freedom with structure, and play with work. This is the type of activity that injects new life into college teaching."

What is best about Nilson's book is the blend of theory and practice. She not only explains what to do, she explains why we should do it. This blend of theory and practice gives more than just insights into creating graphic representations of our courses; she asks us to uncover our course design and the logic behind it for our students. That is an argument whose time has indeed come.

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